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BRAHMIN HUMOR: CHENNAI'S SABHA THEATER AND THE CREATION OF MIDDLE-CLASS INDIAN TASTE FROM THE 1950S TO THE PRESENT

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BRAHMIN HUMOR: CHENNAI'S SABHA THEATER AND THE CREATION OF MIDDLE-CLASS INDIAN TASTE FROM THE 1950S TO THE PRESENT

by

Kristen Dawn Rudisill, B.A.; A.M.

Dissertation

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For Justin and Elijah
who taught me the meaning of
aṉpu, pācam, kātal, and tuṇai

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Back then I was only trying to speak Tamil passably and get to know India a little bit. I started studying Bharata Natyam for fun and exercise and attended other classical music and dance performances and a few specially organized folk performances. I have to thank Dr. S. Bharathy and Rachel Weiss from the AIIS and Madison programs in Madurai for facilitating many of these performances. I returned to the US six months later with a real interest in Tamil and Indian performance arts and started the Ph.D. program at the University of Texas, Austin in 2000 with an amazing group of faculty that included Dr. Sankaran Radhakrishnan and the co-advisors of this dissertation, Drs.

Martha Selby and Kathryn Hansen, who have read this work in so many incarnations that they probably have it memorized by now. I can never say enough to thank these three individuals for their insightful comments and generosity of spirit and time over the last seven years. They have been mentors to me in the true sense of the word.

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Chair and Director just as I was leaving, will continue to strive for excellence in both the Department and the Institute.

I returned to India in 2001, actively looking for a dissertation project, but knowing only that I wanted to work on theater. I spent the summer attending everything from *terukkuttu* to Shakespeare readings and meeting as many people as I could. I have to thank Pritham Chakravarthy for turning me on to sabha theater and encouraging me, against the advice of other Chennai intellectuals, to take it seriously as an academic. I've received many grants in support of this work, including a Fulbright-Hays DDRA that allowed me to spend twelve months from June 2003 to June 2004 in Madras. Not knowing where to affiliate, I made the fortunate decision to join the Madras Music Academy, where I was assigned Nandini Ramani as an advisor. She became dance teacher, fount of information about the city and the performance world, and invaluable contact. She and Pritham Chakravarthy, who read plays and academic writings on the Tamil theater with me three mornings a week, really helped keep the project moving forward. They paid attention to what I was doing and introduced me to many performers, writers, and journalists in Chennai.

I need to send out a special thank you to comedian S. Ve. Shekher and the members of Natakapriya, who opened an amazing number of doors for me. They invited me into their homes as well as to their rehearsals and performances and also took me on tour. I spent many an evening backstage with the actors and technicians and was allowed access that really made me feel like one of the troupe. When I did my audience questionnaires, Shekher helped to design the questions and announced them at every

performance. He even invited me to make the announcement from the stage, and I know that hearing me speak Tamil convinced many audience members to fill them out.

Comedian Kathadi Ramamurthy and playwright Raadhu (S. Radhakrishnan) also provided friendship and assistance with this project. They really believed in me and my project and went to a great deal of trouble to introduce me to people like K. Balachander, C. Nagesh, and Kamalhasan, and even though I was never able to parlay those introductions into interviews, I very much appreciated them. During Kathadi's Golden Jubilee celebrations, Raadhu's daughter Priya procured some very detailed questionnaire answers for me by passing them out to a ladies club that was attending the performances and having them take them home for a night. Their thoughtful answers and comments are much appreciated. I would also like to thank Dr. S. Gopalie for sharing his lifetime of knowledge about the Chennai theater scene with me. His thesis and the interviews and conversations we had were absolutely invaluable, especially to my understanding of the relationships between artists and sabhas.

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Kamala Kamesh, R. S. Srinivasan, Dr. Mathrabootham, Girish Karnad, V. Rajendran, E. V. R. Mohan, Kalai Ravi, Kishore Subramanian, Priya Kishore, P. Muthuswamy, Mr. Prasad, K. P. Arivanantham, S. Thirukkonam, Bombay Gnanam, T. V. Sundararajan, Karur Rangarajan, and Murali. I also had the good fortune to interview R. S. Manohar, whose contribution to the Tamil stage cannot be overstated and whose January, 2006 death marks the end of an era. I also have to thank the many actors, writers, technicians, and audience members that I spoke to at the around one hundred and twenty-five dramas that I attended that year. Special thanks to Kaladhar and Sridhar, ever my allies and friends. I also spoke casually with many sabha secretaries and volunteers, and I thank them for their time and the souvenirs that they provided to me.

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say thank you, everyone, and reiterate how lucky I am to have such interesting, good people as colleagues and friends. And thanks to all my Austin non-graduate student friends, who kept me in perspective. And to our friend C. Maheswari, who enriched our life in Madras, and attended many a drama with me. Justin and I couldn't have asked for a better roommate.

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Brahmin Humor: Chennai's Sabha Theater and the Creation of Middle-Class Indian Taste from the 1950s to the Present

Publication No. _____

Kristen Dawn Rudisill, Ph.D.

Co-Supervisors: Martha Selby and Kathryn Hansen

"Sabha theater" is a genre of Tamil language comedy theater that started in Madras (Chennai) in the period following India's 1947 independence. Its name comes from the fact that the amateur drama troupes rely on cultural organizations known as sabhas for patronage, but the theater also has a very specific aesthetic and narrative style. Sabhas are known for their patronage of classical music and dance, but many also support amateur theater troupes. These organizations, along with the press and academics, create a notion of "good" taste in Chennai, India. All three fields are dominated by the high caste Brahmin community, which thus both constructs and embodies the idea of good taste in the city.

The identity of Brahmins, as the taste-makers of the city, is influential in shaping middle-class culture in Chennai. I argue that this identity is not best visible in tradition, because performances of the classical arts and the response of connoisseur audiences to them reveal an ideal that is frozen in time. I look instead to something spontaneous: humor. The fact that elite Tamil Brahmins choose to join sabhas or attend sabha dramas is not to say that the plays are ideal representations of Tamil Brahmin culture or good taste. In actuality, the discourse about the plays has created two factions within the Tamil

Brahmin community, the most vocal of which dismisses them as “just comedy.” I engage with both voices through case studies of plays that have remained popular with audiences over the years. I also consider such things as how the contemporary political climate and development of mass media have affected live theater in Chennai in terms of aesthetics, personnel, scripts, production, and patronage.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

I follow the Madras University Tamil Lexicon scheme in the transliteration of Tamil words and phrases. There are, however, many names, places, and words that are more familiar in their Anglicized forms (for example, sabha rather than *sapā*, dravida rather than *tirāviṭa*, kazhagam rather than *kaḻakam*). I have included those in the text without diacritics. I have also included some names and play titles without diacritics as they are found in the English-language press in Chennai.

One peculiarity of this project is that many of the texts I am working from are in the spoken form of Tamil. They are spelled out phonetically in Tamil and will look wrong to anyone who knows the correct spelling (for example, *māpḷē* instead of *māppiḷḷai, sombu* instead of *cempu*). I have transliterated these faithfully. When English words have been transliterated into Tamil, I have generally chosen to transliterate them back into proper English (for example, *dear* rather than *diyar, Washington* rather than *Vāsiṅkṭo<u>n</u>*) for ease of reading.

INTRODUCTION

It was the day of Tamil film star Shivaji Ganesan's funeral procession (July 24, 2001) when Pritham Chakravarthy sent me to S. Ve. Shekher's play at the Narada Gana Sabha with an invitation to go backstage before the show. Shekher had been up since six that morning and had followed the funeral procession on foot all the way from Shivaji's house in T. Nagar to the cremation grounds near my flat in Besant Nagar. He decided to go ahead and stage his play as scheduled. It was a tribute to the great actor that people attended, and the minute of silence, though I didn't realize how rare it was at the time, was one of the few true periods of silence from the audience that I experienced at any of Shekher's dramas.

Meeting Shekher and having seen Crazy Mohan's *Jurassic Baby*, I was fascinated by the sabha plays because even though I didn't catch many of the jokes, I could see how much the audiences loved them. The plays were expensive and enjoyed by the middle class although few in the academic or "serious theater" worlds had any respect for them or considered them real "theater." Only Pritham, who had acted in sabha dramas as a child before getting involved in the more activist, socially conscious theater that she does now, encouraged me to explore the genre.

My original intention for this project was to study commercial theater in conjunction with other types of "modern" theater in Chennai (Madras), [1] thinking that the theatrical innovations of these troupes and the varying responses of Chennai's intelligentsia might provide a potential index by which to measure and define the transformation of the city's cultural atmosphere in the light of media, economic, and

[1] The British name for the city, "Madras," was officially changed to "Chennai" in 1996, but both are widely used today.

political changes. There has been some excellent academic work done on modern theater in India's other major cities (Dharwadker 2005, Karnad 1994, Richmond 1990, Shankar 2001, Iyengar 2001, Gokhale 2000, Dalmia 2006, Chatterjee forthcoming) and I sought to contribute to that body of work in a much more comprehensive way than I have done in the end.

This was, as so many projects are in the beginning, far too ambitious of a proposal. "Commercial" theater was not quite the right word for what I was studying, and as I got more interested in and involved with what I came to know as sabha theater, I realized how much there was to be learned from and about it. This pursuit left me little time to explore other genres. I attended a few plays from each and spoke with the main personalities and innovators, but did not keep up sustained relationships with them. It was the plays themselves and the responses of the audience to the humor in them that I was drawn to in the beginning. I was curious about the financial viability and sustainability of these drama troupes, but it wasn't until very late in my fieldwork that I started focusing on patronage and the sabha system as a primary research interest.

Sabhas are cultural organizations that are key players along with the press and academics in creating a notion of "good" taste in Chennai. I learned during my field research that all three fields are dominated by the high-caste Tamil Brahmin community, which thus both constructs and embodies the idea of good taste in the city. Chennai's sabhas have earned an international reputation for quality performance arts based on the annual music festival they organize. Less well known is that they have dictated the style and content of the popular Tamil drama over the past fifty years. "Sabha theater" is a genre of Tamil-language commercial comedy theater that started in Madras in the period

immediately following India's 1947 independence. Its name comes from the fact that the amateur drama troupes rely on the sabha patronage system for survival, but the theater also has a very specific aesthetic and narrative style.

To start research I simply attended plays of all kinds. I would go backstage and meet the artists, and in the sabha world that often translated into an invitation to attend any future plays as a guest of the troupe with automatic backstage access. I would check *The Hindu's* event listings every day and show up at some hall or other three or four nights a week for performances. I was struck by how ubiquitous sabha dramas were in the city, but how little representation they, like most other commercial theater genres in India, had found in the academic world and the press. The study of Indian popular culture has focused, to this point, on mass media and folk performances. Theater scholarship in India has attended primarily to folk, modern, activist/street, and classical genres. I could see the need for a study on this type of theater, beloved by so many middle-class Tamils, and thus directed my efforts there.

I bought every audiocassette and published play I could find and borrowed some that were out of print or unpublished, and spent hours with Pritham Chakravarthy or her daughter Malavika listening and reading. I read through years of issues of *The Hindu* newspaper searching for published criticism. I talked to audience members and visited artists at their homes, backstage, and on tour in India and in the US. The more I saw, the deeper my questions became. I went into the field asking questions about globalization and the purpose of regional language theater for this elite group of Chennai-ites, most of whom were educated in English. As time went by and I attended more plays and met more people, I slowly realized that the audiences were not bound only by their class, but

by their caste, and that caste and language politics in Tamilnadu were central to the shaping of this theater. The sabha theater genre is, in many aspects, a Brahmin theater, and how that happened and why it has continued became some of my biggest questions. One of the aims of this dissertation is to broaden notions of "brahmin" taste and entertainment by contributing a study of a humorous theatrical genre that conforms to few stereotypes, expectations, or self-conceptions.

The identity of Brahmins, as the taste-makers (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense) of Chennai, is influential in shaping middle-class culture in the city. In contrast to other scholars (Singer 1972, Hancock 1999), I argue that this identity is not best visible in tradition and ritual, because performances of the classical arts and the response of connoisseur audiences to them reveal an ideal that is frozen in time. I look instead to something much more fluid and spontaneous: humor. Jokes are cued, but it is common for them to fall flat or lose relevance over time. So when audiences actually laugh and find intended jokes funny these performances can offer some insights into non-idealized self-conceptions of the community of observers who are responsible for the creation of taste in Chennai.

Unlike classical music and dance, which are valued because of their adherence to "tradition," sabha theater is a recent development that has undergone a number of changes over time, reflecting shifts in the political and social identity of the elite Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai. In the early post-colonial period, in contrast to the discussions of Indian national identity that were dominant at the time, Tamil Brahmins chose to emphasize their regional and caste identity with Tamil language plays, and thus began the sabha theater genre.

In the dissertation I study the sabha dramas from a number of different angles, and each chapter deepens my analysis. I look at historical, political, and performance contexts, repertoire, humor, reception, performer, aesthetics, and performance style. The first part of the dissertation is designed to historically, politically, socially, and artistically situate the sabha theater. The plays are part of a multi-lingual world of folk and experimental theater and Tamil-language television and film, with which the sabha theater shares writers, actors, and narratives, and I hope that I clarify how they fit into that broad picture.

I combine an ethnographic approach with performance studies as well as historical and literary analytical approaches in order to offer a complex view of a theatrical genre that is simultaneously patronized and dismissed by its viewers. I consider such things as how the contemporary political climate and development of mass media have affected live theater in terms of aesthetics, personnel, scripts, production, and patronage. In addressing these questions by using both historical research and ethnographic information obtained through questionnaires, interviews with performers, writers, and audience members as well as the observation of rehearsals, performances, and television and film screenings, and reading published criticism, I also dispel some myths about the state of Tamil theater in Chennai. While it is certainly not at its peak now, it is also not "dead" as so many intellectuals and journalists in the city would like to claim. The cultural commentary and relevance of these plays to an educated, middle-class audience both in India and the diaspora, are ample proof of the importance of the plays, and the dedication of many artists and enthusiasts may not lead to a revival, but certainly to a continuation of live Tamil language theater in Chennai.

The fact that many people from the Brahmin community choose to become members of sabhas or attend sabha dramas is not to say that the plays themselves are ideal representations of Tamil Brahmin culture or of good taste. In fact, the discourse about the plays has created two factions within the Tamil Brahmin community, the most vocal of which dismisses them as "just comedy." I engage with both voices in my case studies of several plays that have remained popular and relevant to audiences over the years. My examination of these literary and performance texts along with performer, audience, and press responses allows me to meaningfully approach questions about the circumstances in which the genre emerged, various trends, the drastic decline in audiences in the late 1980s, and how troupes and audiences are responding today.

Part I consists of four chapters. Chapter One situates the genre historically as it relates to other genres of theater in the city of Chennai. Chapter Two takes an in-depth look at "sabhas" themselves. What are they, how did they become popular, what kinds of entertainment do they promote, and what is the effect that this has had on the theater? This chapter looks particularly at the sabhas as a space in which the highbrow "classical" arts are promoted alongside the often disparaged comedy plays that I discuss. Chapter Three situates the genre and its Brahmin patrons in the political context of Tamilnadu during the period when sabha theater emerged and examines the importance of caste identity to this particular genre. Chapter Four is designed to give a closer look at the quantifiable characteristics of the genre. It answers questions such as the following: What does sabha theater look like? What can you expect to see and hear when you attend a play in terms of performers, aesthetics, style, content, language, and humor?

Part Two then looks at three plays of the sabha genre in depth, each representing a different facet of the genre. By looking at individual plays in Part Two of the dissertation I have created case studies for detailed analysis that situate each play historically and politically and better explain their function and appeal to the audience than was possible in the more general Part One. Chapter Five analyzes the play *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* (*Wedding in Washington*) from the early 1960s. This play offers a very detailed description of a perfect Brahmin marriage…in Washington, D. C. The wedding is performed there with the financial assistance of the Rockefellers, who wish to learn about "Indian culture," and clearly delineates the role of good Brahmins in society and the proper way for family relations to work by describng every item of food, clothing, and ritual in detail for the clueless Americans. Chapter Six looks at two plays from very different time periods in order to think about issues of class relations and purity/vulgarity, both of which are central to the self-construction of this Tamil Brahmin community. Purnam Viswanathan's *Undersecretary* from the 1950s and S. Ve. Shekher's 1993 *Ci<u>nn</u>a Māpḷē, Periya Māpḷē* (*Younger Son-in-Law, Elder Son-in-Law*) reveal differences in the ways that Tamils thought about these issues in the post-colonial as opposed to the post-economic liberalization periods. Chapter Seven is on Cho Ramasamy's *Mohammed bin Tughlaq*, a political satire that I argue puts Tamil theater on the map of Indian modern theater.

We all learn from the mistakes we make in our early fieldwork, and one of mine was the audience survey. I knew they were important, and I did get an enormous amount of feedback from those surveys, mostly thanks to S. Ve. Shekher and Kathadi Ramamurthy, but I realized later that I had asked all the wrong questions. I made a new

survey that I took to a Crazy Creations performance in Houston, and that was slightly better, but I know I could have learned much more from it than I did. The survey was helpful, however, in terms of letting people know what I was doing at the plays, the only non-native Tamil speaker present, and I made a lot of my best audience contacts and procured good in-depth interviews with viewers because of it. I learned about theater-going habits, but didn't ask age or caste, which I was afraid couldn't be done tactfully, though I've now changed my mind about that and hope to attempt it on a follow-up visit as I revise the dissertation for publication.

This project, as a study of Tamil theater, is inherently interdisciplinary. The plays and their performances draw on, influence, and are influenced by language, literature, religion, history, politics, media, and culture, and the dissertation draws together all of these areas that are so often discussed separately. In the world of Chennai's sabha theater they are so deeply intertwined that cultural competence in all areas is necessary to follow many of the jokes. In the appendices I include portions of my translations of Cho's *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* and Crazy Mohan's *Honeymoon Couple* to allow readers better access to this previously untranslated (and often unpublished) body of literature.

PART I:
WHAT IS SABHA THEATER?

Chapter One

"An Insipid, Non-Experimental Middle Class Theater":[1]

HISTORY OF SABHA THEATER

In this chapter I will situate sabha dramas in the history of Tamil drama and ask questions about why the genre has routinely been omitted from conventional histories of drama in the region. I also attempt to define the genre by searching for its boundaries and comparing and contrasting it to the other types of plays (street, activist, folk, college, modern, and so on) in various languages that are (or were) concurrently performed in the city of Chennai.

In the period after independence in 1947, Indian theater enthusiasts in many languages and regions began a discussion about the nature of "Indian" theater, and whether or not it was possible to have a "national" theater. While many of these discussions involved ideas about how to return to the "roots" of Indian theater in Sanskrit and folk theater traditions and move away from the borrowed idioms and formats of the colonial legacy of western theater, this was also a period of great innovation and new genres that were hybrid in every way. Sabha theater was one of these genres.

Many histories of Tamil drama have been written, but most of them barely touch on sabha theater, if they mention it at all. The "popular" or "twentieth century" chapters of these books are usually confined to a discussion of the professional Tamil drama troupes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Saktiperumal 1979; Perumal 1981; Bhagavathy 2001), possibly extending to a mention R. S. Manohar's Indian

[1] Rajendran, K. S. "Drama and Society: A Study of Tamil Dramatic Performances (1870-1980)." Thesis presented to the Tamil Nadu Council of Historical Research, March 1989, p. 162. This is Rajendran's description of the Tamil sabha theater, and a situation that he blames on commercial interests and the urban middle class.

National Theater troupe (S. Gurusami and A. Dasarathan 2000), which carried on in the tradition of performing elaborate mythological and historical dramas with large numbers of actors and nineteenth-century-style wing and drop settings.[2] The closest the above-mentioned histories get to the sabha theater is a list or brief discussion of famous cinema artists who were trained on the stage such as M. R. Radha, M. G. Ramachandran, and Sivaji Ganesan. Most of these men were famous theater artists in Boys Companies[3] before starting their own troupes and moving to the cinema field.

It is remarkable that so few scholars, in either Tamil or English, have addressed the genre of sabha theater, especially those (Perumal 1981, Saktiperumal 1979, Ramanujam 1980) that were written at a time (1965-1985) when sabha dramas were at the peak of their popularity. Sabha plays, which have never received much historical or critical attention, are still the most commonly staged plays in Chennai. A few of the advertisements for specific plays showing on February 1, 2004 read like this:

> The Great Comedy Thinker Crazy Mohan's Record created, Masterpiece, Decent Comedy…Comedy King S. V. Shekher's superhit hilarious non-stop comedy…Comedy King Basky in "OHO"…A Five in one Comedy rich with purposeful humour through unique stories…Two fully hilarious Comedy Skits...[4]

In the following pages I will discuss those books and articles that refer to sabha dramas and place them historically in the Tamil dramatic tradition.

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[2] Richmond, Farley P. "Characteristics of the Modern Theatre." In *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance,* edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, 387-462. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 393. James Brandon's *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* puts this in a more derogatory manner, saying that "The National Theatre of Madras still clings to 19th-century staging techniques" (p. 74). Manohar told me that when *Ilaṅkēśvaran* was first inaugurated he had seventy-two actors in his troupe and had to issue ID cards to them all (interview, May 2004). See Farley Richmond 1990 for more on Manohar's troupe and its place in the commercial theater world of Madras in the 1980s.

[3] These were professional touring musical theater troupes made up of boys under the age of twelve that were popular in Tamilnadu in the early twentieth century. See Baskaran 1981, Saktiperumal 1979, and T. K. Shanmugam 1967 for more on the boys companies of the early twentieth century.

[4] "Music Dance Drama," *The Hindu,* February 1, 2004. See Figure 1.

In her 2005 book *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage*, Susan Seizer offers a very succinct history of Tamil drama that situates sabha theater nicely, although she does not call it by that name. Her narrative is designed to highlight the inception of a different genre, that of Special *Nāṭakam,* or Special Drama. She is interested in how that type of theater began and why its unique troupe-less structure has worked so well in the context of performances contracted for village festivals. Seizer's summary of the different branches of Tamil drama does not need to be repeated here except for insofar as it touches on the history of sabha theater. The history is structured like a tree, with Special Drama and Sabha Theater as closely related parallel branches forking from the professional drama company model.[5] These Tamil drama companies were modeled on the touring British and Parsi troupes that were popular in nineteenth century India. The Tamil professional troupes dominated proscenium stages in Chennai in the early twentieth century, but became increasingly expensive to run. Most had folded by the end of the 1940s.[6]

Most of the famous Tamil drama companies of the early twentieth century, such as those run by Govindaswami Rao, Nawab Rajamanickam and the T. K. S. Brothers,

[5] They have actually intersected on occasion, as for example when Crazy Mohan performed a solo stand-up comedy routine as a guest at a Special Drama performance. (Susan Seizer, personal communication, March 2007.)

[6] R. S. Manohar's Indian National Theater is the exception. Farley Richmond wrote that "eventually the only commercial theatre that was able to withstand the pressure was Manohar's National Theatre, organized in the mid-1950s—a group which catered, to an extent, to the changing tastes of its audiences and the demands of the Sabhas" (Richmond 1990, p. 431). He doesn't really explain what Manohar did to adapt to changing tastes that allowed him to start this troupe and run it successfully at a time when others of its type had folded. In 1990 Richmond "wondered how long this finely tuned, well-executed vestige of the past would survive the rapid changes of modern India (*sic*) life (p. 461)," and the answer has proved to be not very long. In 1996, during a performance of *Narakasuran,* in the scene where Manohar, in the lead role, elopes with the girl, he and the actress were twenty-one feet in the air when the back support on the trolley broke and they fell. She fell on top of him and he seriously injured his back. (My interview, 2004.) The injury forced him to stop performing until 2003, when he began performing a few benefit shows, one of which I was fortunate enough to see. He died on January 10, 2006. Some of the children of the T. K. S. Brothers have recently started a similar troupe, but they are not doing well financially. T. K. S. Pughugherti told me that Manohar does not have their expenses in staging a play because he has a storage unit and owns all of his own costumes and stage properties.

were famous for their elaborate portrayals of historical and mythological tales. Like the Parsi theater that preceded them, these plays used elaborate costumes, stage settings, props, and spectacle in their productions.[7] The trademark of the Parsi stage, however, was song. The famous *Indar Sabha* play, for example, was all in verse and has been described as "a pageant of song and dance connected by a thread of a story."[8]

Whatever its aesthetic and stylistic influences on Tamil theatrical traditions, the traveling Parsi theater definitely instigated an escalation in the number of new Tamil drama companies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Susan Seizer writes that

> [t]he two most influential were those begun by Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar,[9] a member of the judicial service, in 1891, and Sankaradas Swamigal in 1910…These two companies also inaugurate the split of modern Tamil theater into its two separate streams: the world of elite amateur drama sabhas, and that of professional commercial popular theater companies.[10]

Seizer tells the story of Sankaradas Swamigal's legacy; the story I am telling is that of the "elite amateur drama sabhas" inspired by the work of Sambanda Mudaliyar,[11] to whom Tamil drama historian A. N. Perumal refers as the "Father of Modern Drama."[12] These two men had very different relationships with the Parsi theater and the theatrical traditions that they most influenced (Special Drama for Swamigal and sabha theater for

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[7] See Hansen, Kathryn. "The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India (1853-1956)" in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India.* Edited by Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001: 76-114 for details on the Parsi theater and its influence on theater traditions in Chennai and elsewhere in India and Southeast Asia.

[8] Hansen 2001, p. 78.

[9] Nearly all of the Tamil drama histories discuss the work of Sambanda Mudaliyar. Additionally, he himself has written several books about theater.

[10] Seizer, Susan. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 53.

[11] Several troupes also have relationships with the T. K. S. Brothers troupe that performed in Madras. T. K. Shanmugam had worked with Sankaradas Swamigal before starting his own troupe. See Appendix F.

[12] Perumal, A. N. *Tamil Drama: Origin and Development.* Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1981, p. 137.

Mudaliyar) reflect those aesthetic and literary tendencies. Perumal writes that Mudaliyar's work borrowed heavily from Parsi theater, that it was "literary and stage-worthy," and that this director, actor, and administrator's ninety-four plays included tragedies, mythologicals, and social reform plays. The forty mostly mythological plays of Sankaradas Swamigal, in contrast, used "real colloquial prose," lots of songs, and borrowed heavily from folk traditions.[13]

In his autobiography, Mudaliyar credits the English-language plays staged by Europeans with giving him his first respect for the theater. He writes disparagingly of the Tamil plays performed near his boyhood home:

> I never went to these places to see the shows put up there even for five minutes. Not only that. On the contrary, I developed a positive hatred for them….Their costumes, make-up, and the way they conducted themselves had all instilled in me only a sense of aversion. Besides, my father used to take me to the Old College at Nungampakkam where the Europeans staged English plays. It was not surprising, therefore, when I compared the costumes and make-up of the English actors with those of performers in Tamil plays, I could have no liking for either the Tamil plays or these performers.[14]

It never occurred to him that members of the educated elite could act in Tamil plays until he saw a performance in Telugu by the Sarasa Vinodha Sabha led by lawyer Maharajarajashri Krishnamacharya of Bellary and his entire world changed. Mudaliyar, a respected lawyer and judge, went on to author many plays and become best known for his role in the transformation of Tamil theater. He started his troupe in 1891 and brought many elements of the English theater into his re-formulated Tamil theater, beginning with the elimination of songs. Mudaliyar describes a rehearsal for a performance of *Indra Sabha*, saying the musicians

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[13] Ibid., p. 141.
[14] Mudaliar, Pammal Sambanda. "Over Forty Years Before the Footlights": Chapters I & IV. Introduced and translated by Venkat Swaminathan. *Sangeet Natak* 121-122 (July-December 1996): 25-39, p. 26.

> were striking the cymbals at such a loud pitch that it tore one's eardrums. It was all songs and songs….Though I sat through the exercise in silence, I was writhing within myself in disgust. To me, one who had read a few plays of the great playwright Shakespeare, this play *Indra Sabha* was not at all agreeable. To me, one who had seen performances in [*sic*] some English plays, the acting of these men did not appeal a wee bit.[15]

He then resorted to stealing the cymbals and hiding them at his house until he had managed to convince the troupe to do without as well as to eliminate the background chorus. One by one, he transformed the characteristics of Tamil theater that he found unappealing and modeled his own plays and performance practices much more on the English style that he so appreciated, even adapting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as the Tamil *Amalādityan* and playing the title role himself in 1906.

Sambanda Mudaliyar's troupe was called the "Suguna Vilasa Sabha" and his actors were "amateurs" who came from "good families."[16] The use of the word "amateur" was important to them as it distinguished them from the "professional" stage, which has a reputation in intellectual circles of being "nonserious, superficial, inartistic, or merely popular, and hence not worth preserving."[17] The amateur artists, on the other hand, being free from the commercial need to please the public and earn money, saw themselves as having the freedom to serve the art and create. Unlike Special Drama with its flexible schedule, fixed drama season, and every-actor-for-himself organization, which was "better adapted to the vagaries of the alcoholic tide of an actor's life,"[18] drama on the

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[15] Mudaliar (Swaminathan translation) 1996, pp. 31-2.
[16] According to actor M. R. Radha, it was when Brahmins and people like Sambanda Mudaliar got involved in the field that *kūttu* ("scene, farce") became *nāṭakam* ("drama, theater") and *kūttāṭi* (derogatory "actor") became *naṭikaṉ* ("actor") and *kalaiñaṉ* ("artist"). These men, by their very presence and interest, brought a measure of respectability to the stage (quoted in Vindhan. *"Naṭika Vēḷ* M. R. Radha" ("'King of Acting' M. R. Radha"). In *Tamiḻ Nāṭakamēṭai Muṉṉōṭikaḷ* ("Pioneers of Tamil Stage Drama"), edited by S. S. Ramar Ilango, 125-134. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1998, p. 132).
[17] Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947.* Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005, p. 43.
[18] Seizer 2005, p. 61.

urban stages could last year round. It was common for actors to be kicked out of drama companies for drinking, and the boys companies closely monitored their charges in order to prevent it. Mudaliyar expressly forbade drinking to all members of his sabha. He, as one of the elites of the sabha theater, attempted to compensate for the not-so-respectable reputation of professional theater artists by distinguishing his troupe and their productions in every way possible, including style, content, language, sets, and costumes.[19]

Mudaliyar's Suguna Vilasa Sabha performed many translations and adaptations of western and Sanskrit plays in Tamil, and Mudaliyar later authored many plays based on contemporary social themes, which were hugely influential for the sabha theater genre. "Sambanda Mudaliyar's contribution," writes Seizer, "feeds that stream in Tamil drama of an elite, modern 'social' theater by and for middle-class society."[20] This arrangement, where amateur, middle-class performers put up plays about contemporary social issues on evenings and weekends, sharply contrasted with Sankaradas Swamigal's company, where the artists were professionals and the plays were based on puranic and court themes. Some of Swamigal's protégés, like T. K. Shanmugam, went on to form their own professional drama troupes that performed in the urban context; others became freelance performers of Special Drama on village and rurban[21] stages.

Special Drama consisted of similar plays to the ones performed by the professional companies that had closed by the end of World War II, and the actors were usually people who had left the companies to work independently, contracted for

[19] See chapter four for detailed descriptions of these elements of the sabha dramas.
[20] Seizer 2005, p. 54.
[21] "Rurban" is a term Seizer borrows from A. K. Ramanujan that is used "to describe what he perceives as a notion, emergent in both classical and modern Tamil literature, of 'a center continuous with the countryside.'" Seizer 2005, p. 48.

individual performances. Drama companies closed for many reasons, and one of the major ones that contributed to the closing of theaters all over India, highlighted by James Brandon in the *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre,* was the popularity of cinema.[22] Certainly in Madras it was difficult for theater troupes to compete with the surge of films during the 1940s and 1950s. These films borrowed stories, techniques, and actors from the popular theater and also included excellent music and dance performances. Additionally, films were more profitable to produce than plays. They cost less for individual audience members to attend than plays, but received more return on their investment than the stage plays since the films could be distributed all over the state and played to many theaters full of audiences.

Something clearly needed to change in order for the live theater to continue after film, and James Brandon noted the shift in style that took place during this period: "music and song were dropped in favor of dialogue, as in modern Western drama."[23] Director and theater scholar C. Ramanujam wrote in 1980 that the work of Tamil theater writers and actors had no relationship with the Indian, international, or modern stage traditions, but still turned to the "threadbare Parsi theater"[24] for inspiration. This was a time when sabha dramas, which deliberately defined themselves in opposition to the professional drama troupes' aesthetic style, reigned supreme. One of the similarities Ramanujam sees is that audiences for both types of plays had no basic knowledge of stagecraft or performance and were unaware of their illiteracy on these subjects. It is unclear which troupes Ramanujam is discussing in this passage, but certainly drama

[22] See Brandon, James R., editor. *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 74.
[23] Ibid., p. 76.
[24] *Naintupōṉa Pārsi tiyēṭṭar* (Ramanujam, C. *Nāṭaka Kaṭṭuraikaḷ.* ("Drama Essays") Chennai: Kaavya, 2003, p. 61).

artists in Tamilnadu thought deeply about the ways in which production choices affected the communication of messages and themes. S. Theodore Baskaran describes a conference on drama that took place in Erode in 1944

> in which playwrights, actors and song-writers took part...It considered the preoccupation of the popular theater with mythologicals and musicals as a sign of decadence, and discussed steps to infuse a new vigour into the stage. Such a mood of introspection on the part of the popular theatre was a result of the stage's role in the national movement. The handling of social and political themes on the stage had incidentally produced a salutary effect on the quality of plays. It marked a definite change in the dramatic content of stage-writing.[25]

The didactic reformist dramas made popular by Dravidian nationalists demonstrated a shift away from well-known mythological stories and emphasis on song in concert with a rise in the importance of dialogue. These shifts greatly influenced the sabha dramas that appeared a few years later and the aesthetic trends persist to this day. Even R. S. Manohar, who ran one of the few professional theater troupes in the popular mythological style in post-Independence Madras, never really used songs except occasionally for a montage. By 2003, when Ramanujam published his collection of essays, even Manohar was no longer performing, and the currently popular sabha plays bear very little resemblance to the Parsi theater.

"Sabha" theater was one of these new dramatic traditions that started in the post-Independence period and favored dialogue over other aspects of production. It represented a new form of popular theater that remained on the urban stages after genres like Special Drama had moved to rural and rurban stages. Following in the footsteps of Sambanda Mudaliyar, sabha drama took more from the British theater than from the Parsi. It was also less spectacular, with an appeal based on clever, fast-paced dialogue.

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[25] Baskaran, S. Theodore. *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the* Entertainment Media in South India 1880-1945. Madras: Cre-A, 1981, p. 41.

Sabha theater actors come from elite backgrounds and had western educations, steady incomes, and secure social status. They choose to take up participation in dramas as a hobby, rather than as a career. Farley Richmond, instead of placing the burden of blame on the film industry, argues that sabhas, as cultural organizations which sponsored theatrical productions, "hastened the demise of the old-style commercial theatre of Madras," which couldn't compete financially with the new cheap amateur productions and therefore couldn't attract the necessary sponsorship of sabhas.[26] Elite amateur drama was not a new phenomenon in the post-World War II period, as elites had been translating and adapting western dramas for elite audiences as early as the 1860s in Chennai,[27] but it was new for sabhas, functioning as a patronage system, to support this type of drama in this period.

Although these dramas were the ones most commonly found on the stages of Madras at the time, A. N. Perumal, in his 1981 comprehensive history of Tamil drama, barely mentions the popular stage as it existed then.[28] He respects political satirist Cho Ramasamy, who is part of the sabha theater movement, though with his own style and identity, and spends some time praising his humor as "intelligent, interesting and factual" as well as "modern, real, artistic, appreciable and entertaining,"[29] but that is all he has to say about the world of contemporary theater. He lists a few of the famous film actors who also worked on the stage and drew crowds to theaters such as Sivaji Ganesan, M. R.

[26] See Richmond 1990, p. 431. Richmond writes that Manohar estimated his cost to be 100,000 rupees per production (430). Komal Swaminathan's daughter estimated that when his social play *Taṇṇīr! Taṇṇīr!* (*Water! Water!*) was first staged by his theater company, Stage Friends, that it cost around 50,000 rupees, an amount she thought was typical for that type of production (S. Sankar 2001, p. 124). A typical sabha theater production, in contrast, costs closer to 2500-5000 rupees plus the theater rental (my estimation based on observation). The exchange rate in 2003-2004 was approximately forty-four rupees to the dollar.
[27] See Seizer 2005, p. 51 and Baskaran 2001, p. 77.
[28] This is the same year that Karthigesu Sivatambi wrote his *Drama in Ancient Tamilnadu.*
[29] Perumal 1981, p. 173.

Radha, and M. G. Ramachandran, but entirely ignores the concurrent tradition of comedy sabha dramas and the popular theater giants of his time such as Purnam Viswanathan, Marina, S. Ve. Shekher, and Kathadi Ramamurthy in favor of the experimental theater. Perumal, like so many Tamil academics, was much more interested in the social reform possibilities of the theater than the entertainment value and therefore focused on more experimental groups such as Koothuppattarai and Pareeksha in Chennai and Nija Nāṭakam in Madurai.

Saktiperumal's 1979 *Tamiḻ Nāṭaka Varalāṟu* (*History of Tamil Drama*) includes much more than A. N. Perumal's on twentieth-century drama, but his focus is similar. There are long sections on many of the early drama companies and their directors, writers, and actors as well as on the political plays by Dravidian writers such as C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi. He is also greatly interested in the production of foreign language dramas in Madras (especially Shakespeare), but sabha dramas are notably absent, even though the genre was very strong during the period of his writing. Saktiperumal, like A. N. Perumal, acknowledges only Cho Ramasamy from the sabha genre, and includes summaries of several of Cho's most famous plays (*Maṉam Oru Kuraṅgu* "The Mind is a Monkey," *Yārukkum Veṭkam Illai* "No One Has Any Shame," and *Mohammad bin Tughlaq*).

The International Institute of Tamil Studies published a volume called *Tamil Nāṭakamēḍai Muṉṉōḍikaḷ* (*Pioneers of the Tamil Drama Stage*) in 1998. It is a collection of essays about and interviews with some famous actors, writers, and troupe leaders, but few could be considered to be from the sabha theater. The chapters cover Sankaradas Swamigal, C. Kannaiya, Sambanda Muthaliyar, T. P. Krishnasami Paavalar, Nawab

Rajamanickam, M. Kandasami Mudaliyar, Balamani Ammaal, N. S. Krishnan, Kalaiarasu Cornalingam, T. K. Shanmugam, M. R. Radha, V. Ramakappiramaniyam, S. V. Sahasranamam, V. Gopalakrishnan, Anna (C. N. Annadurai), and M. Karunanidhi. In 1999 the Institute published another collection of papers, ones that were written for the Twentieth Century Tamil Drama Conference.[30] These essays are divided into six sections: Twentieth Century Tamil Drama Symposium, Sankaradas Swamigal Dramas, Special Dramas, Pommal Sambanda Dramas, Educational Dramas, and Modern Dramas. The "modern" (*navīna*) drama section has one article by S. V. Sahasranamam on mythological plays, but the other articles are focused on radio plays and experimental dramas with the exception of Arakappan's article. This article refers to the issue of English language titles for Tamil-language plays and includes a brief discussion of a speech Cho Ramasamy made at a function held to celebrate the staging of S. Ve. Shekher's 1000th performance.[31]

C. Ramanujam addresses sabha theater directly in his 1980 essay "*Navīna Tamil Nāṭakam*" ("Modern Tamil Drama"), but in a very derogatory way. He sets it up as a contrast to the work of experimental playwright N. Muthusamy, whose plays Ramanujam has directed. He begins the chapter with a discussion of the arts of playwriting, stagecraft, and theater with reference to Jerzy Grotowski, then has a long quote reportedly from Brandon's *Guide to Asian Theatre,* though I didn't find anything so detailed on Chennai's theater in the 1993 edition of that book. A large part of Ramanujam's critique of Chennai's modern theater is simply that it is not the

[30] *Irubatām Nūṟṟāṇḍut Tamil Nāṭakaṅkaḷ* edited by M. Ramaswamy, K. Murukesan, and P. Govindasamy (Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1999).

[31] Shekher is currently the biggest name in the sabha theater world. He has now staged well over four thousand productions and draws the most audience members to theaters. He has a radio show, a television program, many films, and has just been elected as the MLA of Mylapore for the AIADMK.

experimental theater he has come to appreciate in Muthusamy and others, and that has attracted national and international recognition. He says that

> [t]he modern dramas that are happening in Chennai are all very ordinary stuff. Here there are no attempts at the experimentation that creates excitement. For the most part, the programmes have no meat and are staged by amateur drama troupes. The sabha network here comes forward with money and protection to stage these fourth-rate, lifeless plays dozens of times. If you happen to see dramas in many theaters continuously, don't think your eyes are deceived when you see the stage settings, tables, chairs, etc. from the first day in all the theaters….They rent these from commercial companies. It is a mystery how Tamils, who possess maturity and high levels of knowledge in other areas, have been tolerating these foolish stage dramas.[32]

The specific critiques are mostly superficial. Ramanujam feels that quality productions commission stage settings that contribute to the atmosphere of each play, and that renting generic sets is in poor taste. He also takes issue with the idea of productions that are put up for the purpose of earning money. Since the sabhas are earning money, he argues, they are complacent and have no incentive to demand improvement in the quality of the dramas they sponsor. The plays, he complains, are "foolish" and have no "meat" or "experimentation;" that is, they don't challenge audience members, as he clearly believes all art should.

Ramanujam's article is representative of the common analytical strategy of contrasting sabha theater with "modern" or "experimental" drama, which are much more respected and discussed in academic circles. Ramanujam, Perumal, and other like-minded scholars favor the work of Tamil playwrights such as N. Muthusamy and Indira Parthasarathy,[33] who spent time in Delhi and are concerned with theater and stagecraft theory. These playwrights are part of a national theatrical tradition that Aparna

[32] Ramanujam 2003, p. 61 (my translation).
[33] C. Ramanujam also mentions Ambai.

Dharwadker has described as "modern" Indian theater. Many of them have been translated into English and are available in anthologies of modern Indian drama or as individual plays through such prestigious publishing houses as Seagull and Oxford University Press. The plays of these writers are literary creations usually produced by outside troupes and/or directors for weekend performances at a single theater. When they are produced in Chennai they are at different theater spaces than those that the sabhas use. These plays, like English-language plays, tend to utilize the Museum Theater, the Music Academy Theater, and the Alliance Française instead of the Narada Gana Sabha, Rani Seethai Hall, and Vani Mahal that the sabha plays favor.

Aparna Dharwadker places Tamil plays on the second tier in her four-tier hierarchy of contemporary theater languages in India. The first tier consists of Bengali and Marathi, languages which have had a modern urban theater tradition since the middle of the nineteenth century. These traditions have produced many notable playwrights in the post-Independence period, and have a number of nationally-recognized amateur theater troupes as well as supportive audiences. On the second tier she places languages such as Hindi, Kannada, Gujarati, Tamil, and Malayalam, "which began their development as modern dramatic media a little later than Bengali and Marathi during the colonial period but now possess comparable traditions."[34] The third tier, which includes English, Punjabi, Urdu, Manipuri, and Telugu, has important individual playwrights, but no real "continuous usable tradition."[35] On the fourth tier are the languages that have only a regional, but no national presence in theater or no significant modern or

[34] Dharwadker 2005, p. 73.
[35] Ibid.

contemporary theater tradition at all. These languages are those such as Kashmiri, Sindhi, Oriya, Assamese, Bihari, and Marwari.

English and Hindi, the two transregional languages of India, are an important medium for translation of plays from other Indian languages, but they each have a different function. Plays translated into Hindi are performed all over the country and thus link the theatrical traditions of the nation through performance; plays translated into English are published and circulate mostly in print. As Dharwadker rightly points out, although there is a tradition reaching back to the 1870s, the Indian dramas originally written in English consist "mainly of obscure texts for reading, not performance."[36] Even modern English playwrights such as Gurcharan Das, Mahesh Dattani, and Gieve Patel, according to Dharwadker, have "not acquired a strong theatrical base or textual circulation."[37] These plays are rarely translated into other Indian languages that have strong performance traditions.

It is true that there are few original English-language playwrights in Tamilnadu,[38] but in Chennai the modern drama movement is almost entirely English-medium, and concentrates primarily on productions of foreign plays (usually adapted to better fit the cultural context of Chennai). The Madras Players have been around for more than fifty years producing plays by Shakespeare and others, there are numerous college theater groups, Masquerade and the more recent Evam perform English-language plays, and then there are visiting productions from abroad and other parts of India. Magic Lantern has a

[36] Ibid., p. 82.
[37] Ibid.
[38] When I interviewed English-language playwright K. S. Narayan on October 10, 2003, he mentioned himself, Tim Muran, and Chetan Shah as the only three Tamilnadu playwrights writing dramas in English. Narayan said he chose to write in English so that foreigners who know India could "read and appreciate" his plays. He was in the process of searching for a publisher at that time.

relationship with the Alliance Française and translates primarily French plays (Guy de Maupassant, Eugene Ionesco, Phillippe Minyana) into Tamil for performance. They have also translated and performed plays by Dario Fo, Shakespeare, and Chandrasekhar Kambar in Tamil.

There are a few nationally-known playwrights in Tamil such as Indira Parthasarathy, N. Muthusamy, and Komal Swaminathan. Swaminathan is the only one of them whose plays have been performed in the sabhas, and he had some serious misgivings about this and disagreements with the Federation of City Sabhas. The others' plays are performed in spaces such as the Alliance Française and the Max Mueller Bhavan, which are small theaters catering to more international tastes than the sabha plays attract. They may also hire spaces like the Museum Theater or the Music Academy for one- or two-night performances like many English-language productions do. The Museum Theater is a beautifully renovated government-owned space in which elaborate sets can be built. The drawback is that if the government needs it on short notice, the production can be postponed indefinitely or cancelled outright. The Madras Players have taken to performing south of Chennai along the coast road and offering dinner with their productions. These remote locations mean that all of their audience members must have their own transportation to the performances and therefore be of the highest economic status.

Academic treatments of Tamil playwrights with literary appeal often include more general discussions on Indian drama with the founding of the National School of Drama in 1957 in Delhi and other artist training institutions. They cover the work of troupes like Nija Nāṭakam, Koothuppattarai (Muthusamy's troupe), and Pareeksha (Annamalai 2001;

M. Ramaswamy 2001; Ashokmitran 1999[39]). These troupes tend to address social issues in their plays and experiment with using folk idioms and western formats. The troupe leaders have studied theories of drama and performance and are often trained at professional institutions like the National School of Drama. Muthusamy received a Ford Foundation grant for Koothuppattarai that allowed the troupe to keep a house in Tiruvannamalai, Madras for actors to live and rehearse in. They could also pay actors a living wage so that they could practice their art full time. Now that the grant is up, Koothuppattarai struggles, but they have a commission with the Corporation of Chennai to create and perform street dramas on a variety of social issues such as AIDS awareness, the role of women in the family, and the littering of plastic bags.[40]

On October 4, 2003, *The Hindu* did a spread called "On the Stage in Chennai" that discusses the history of theater in Chennai from about the 1950s. It says very clearly that "[t]here was a time when the only theatre group in Chennai was the Madras Players." That troupe celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in 2005—shortly *after* sabha drama troupes like the United Amateur Artists (2002) and Viveka Fine Arts (2004) celebrated theirs.[41] The article is interesting because it completely ignores, and in its selective telling of history, erases the most visible and popular theatrical tradition Chennai has seen in the post-Independence period. The (anonymous) writers need to redefine their use of the word "theater," because they clearly only use it to mean a certain type of theater that

[39] Ashokmitran's article also includes a discussion of English-language dramas in Chennai.
[40] V. Arasu mentions *Tāy Cēy* ("Mother and Child") and *Vaḷka Maṉaiviyam Kuṭumpat Talaivi* ("Long Live My Wife, the Head of the Family") (Arasu, V. *Tamiḻaka Vīti Araṅkam: Muṉṉeḻumpum Vivātaṅkaḷ* ("The Street Stage of the Tamil Land: The Rise of Debates"). In *Tamiḻ Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum* ("Tamil Drama—Yesterday Today"), edited by K. Bhagavathy, 1-12. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2000, p. 3). I attended a performance of *Kuppai Mēla* ("Garbage Celebration") in 2001. In that play, the actors use folk techniques such as drummers to attract crowds, colorful costumes and makeup, and song and dance in order to encourage residents to minimize their littering and keep Chennai beautiful.
[41] http://www.themadrasplayers.com/index2.htm, viewed on July 12, 2007.

is mostly English language, but not entirely. Koothuppattarai is mentioned as "the city's premier Tamil theatre repertory," and the list of what they consider legitimate theater troupes also includes the Boardwalkers, Loyola Theatre Society, Masquerade, Theatre Harlequin, Magic Lantern, Evam, and the Grossly Commercial Theatre Company in addition to children's theater troupes like Aysha Rau's Little Theater and Curtain Calls and college theater groups that put on plays every year.

Tamil Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum (*Tamil Drama—Yesterday and Today*), edited by K. Bhagavathy in 2000, is another collection of essays about drama and has the distinction of being the only Tamil academic book I have found that really treats sabha theater in depth. M. Tangarasu's article "Tamilil Sabha Nāṭaka Marabu" ("The Sabha Drama Tradition in Tamil") narrates the history of drama in Tamilnadu from the sangam period, when he says that theater was called the "King of the Arts"[42] because it includes costumes, sculpture, painting, scene structures, good thoughts to trigger the mind, music, dance, and literature. With the political changes that followed this period, he writes that there was a loss of interest and audiences that caused Tamil theater to die, "[b]ut the ashes continued to smolder and burn intensely."[43] According to Tangarasu's story, theater in Tamilnadu used to be performed "in high places," but was later revived in the streets for common villagers in the form of *terukkūttu.*[44] He has a lot of respect for these

[42] *Kalaikkarasu.* Tangarasu, M. *Tamiḻil Sabha Nāṭaka Marapu* ("The Sabha Drama Tradition in Tamil"). In *Tamiḻ Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum* ("Tamil Drama—Yesterday Today"), edited by K. Bhagavathy, 86-95. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2000, p. 86.
[43] Ibid., p. 87.
[44] For more information on the art of *terukkūttu,* see Bruin, Hanne de. *Kaṭṭaikkūttu: The Flexibility of a South Indian Theatre Tradition.* Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1999; Frasca, Richard Armando. *The Theater of the Mahabharata: Terukkūttu Performances in South India.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990; Hiltebeitel, Alf. *The Cult of Draupadi,* Volume I, "Mythologies from Gingee to Kurukshetra." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; Hiltebeitel, Alf. *The Cult of Draupadi,* Volume II, "On Hindu Ritual and the Goddess." Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991; and Rudisill, Kristen. "Bharata Natyam and Terukkuttu: E. Krishna Iyer's Revival Efforts" in *Sagar* 10 (2003): 1-16.

artists who "saved it [theater] from completely disappearing," but apparently *terukkūttu* was soon reduced to simply *kūttu,* and Tangarasu credits Sankaradas Swamigal and Sambanda Mudaliyar with bringing a new light and giving the art of theater a new lease of life at the end of the nineteenth century.

The professional theater troupes of those two men along with others who followed them brought, in Tangarasu's estimation, good, well-produced plays to the people and got audiences interested in theater again, at least until the 1930s and the film craze in Tamilnadu. Tangarasu dates the start of sabha theater after India's independence, and says that it was really in the 1950s that these amateur troupes took off. This is in accord with what I found in my research. Tangarasu takes sabha drama seriously as an academic, but that doesn't translate into admiration for the genre. The end of his article, where he really analyzes the theater, takes the form of a litany on everything that has deteriorated on the Tamil stage to reach this new low point devoid of live music, costume, good storylines, or messages. He blames sabhas for his perceived lack of quality theater in the city. Because they provided ready-made audiences for the plays, it didn't matter how good or bad the plays were.

The organization of the sabhas and their patronage certainly encouraged a certain type of play, one which would draw audiences to the theater. Farley Richmond and S. Shankar have both convincingly argued that the homogenization of the plays is an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the sabha system. Richmond, for example, wrote that

> [i]n the late 1960s and early 1970s it became apparent that a theatre group needed the Sabhas in order to survive. The Sabhas monopolized the business of amateur theatre. The theatre groups were forced to cater to the whims and tastes of the Sabha office bearers and their membership. Plays with controversial themes or

> productions with unique or unusual themes or staging techniques were out of the question because they did not appeal to the tastes of the Sabhas and threatened to jeopardize their small but significant investments. Experimentation came to a standstill in the city. The tail now wagged the dog. And yet the theatre groups had to continue to produce plays to remain in the eye of the public, otherwise they might lose whatever reputation they had gained in the 1950s. Thus they continue to produce plays no matter how trite their content or how low the standard of production.[45]

The plays, despite these criticisms, continued to flourish and echoed the themes from the 1950s that originally gave the genre the "reputation" Richmond refers to. These plays grew out of not just the drama company tradition, but also in response to a political dramatic tradition that was widespread in the post-Independence period.

The political dramas are often referred to in academic circles, and a few have been translated into English,[46] but there are few thorough treatments of these dramas. K. S. Rajendran's 1989 thesis *Drama and Society: A Study of Tamil Dramatic Performances (1870-1980)* comes closest. The thesis contains a fairly detailed history of recent Tamil drama that addresses both the political dramas and the sabha dramas. Rajendran's primary interest is in post-1940s dramas, especially the "reformist drama with a new crop of committed playwrights from the Dravidian movement who gave the popular Tamil drama a new social and political dimension," and even further focusing on those plays that were "part of a larger Tamil renaissance which witnessed the revival of Tamil literary classics, a movement in 'new writing' and de-sanskritization of Tamil language."[47] In addition to the excellent details and general analysis of the Dravida Munnēṟṟa Kazhagam (DMK) dramas, Rajendran provides limited information about the sabha theater. The involvement of the DMK party in drama, according to Rajendran,

[45] Richmond 1990, p. 431.
[46] Karunanidhi's *Poompukar* is one.
[47] Rajendran 1989, p. 1.

really stopped with their successful election bid of 1967,[48] which is when the sabha dramas were at the beginning of their twenty-year period of supremacy in the world of Tamil theater. According to A. Ramasamy, sabha playwrights like K. Balachander and Komal Swaminathan took the form of Dravidian dramatic texts and just changed the content. He says that K. Balachander shifted the focus to the Brahmin middle-class, and then Komal Swaminathan added communist leanings to the Brahmin.[49]

One of the most important scholars of sabha theater, S. Gopalie, graduated from the National School of Drama in Delhi in 1963 and moved back to Madras and the theater scene there full of new ideas about what "good" theater was. He worked with S. V. Sahasranamam's Seva Stage for a few years, was a drama and film critic for many years as well as the producer of Doordarshan's Sunday Dramas from 1974-1992. In 2002, he decided to write a thesis specifically on sabha theater, or "metro theater," as he calls it, a genre that he recognized as having been denied critical attention. His thesis basically consists of a series of transcriptions of interviews with writers, actors, and sabha secretaries. The interviews were recorded on audiocassette in Tamil, then translated into English. The copy I have is actually an early draft of Gopalie's English translations and I unfortunately don't have any access to the original Tamil, which I believe exist only in the form of audio recordings. His interviews, in any form, are invaluable. He talked to virtually everyone in the industry, many of whom I could not interview due to death, illness, or simply lack of time or access. His thesis does not include any analysis of these interviews, but does have a brief introduction situating the genre.

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[48] Ibid., p. 141.

[49] See Ramasamy, A. *Tamiḻil Nāṭaka Eḻuttum Pārvaiyāḷarkaḷum* ("Works and Audiences of Drama in Tamil"). In *Tamiḻ Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum* ("Tamil Drama—Yesterday Today"), edited by K. Bhagavathy, 106-118. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2000.

Besides Gopalie's thesis, there are only two extensive academic works that I know of on the sabha theater, both of which focus on the work of playwright T. S. Sridhar (a. k. a. Marina).[50] M. V. Sudakar published his M.Phil. Thesis in 1981 under the title *Mēriṉaviṉ Nāṭakaṅkaḷ* (*The Dramas of Marina*). He did his research in 1980 and the book focuses on the seven dramas Marina had published (as serials in the *Āṉanta Vikaṭan* journal) by that time.[51] Sudarkar is clearly a fan of Marina's and thinks his plays are "without shortcomings."[52] The stated objective of his book is to give explanations of the dramas with reference to theme, plot, character, style, special features, and nuances of the art.[53] He gives detailed plot summaries of each play and includes the transcript of an interview he did with Marina at the end of the book.

Gabriella Ferro-Luzzi's *The Taste of Laughter* is about Tamil jokes and humor, and contains a significant section on humor in Marina's plays. Her aim, similar to mine but on a much broader scale, is to "give a contribution to the knowledge of Tamil culture" through an understanding of what makes Tamil people laugh. The book is divided into three parts, and the first two deal with "humour created by educated urban Tamils and primarily addressed to the same audience," the same creators and consumers as sabha dramas, though focused mostly on joke books, jokes published in the popular Tamil weeklies,[54] and humorous short stories and novels. She also includes a chapter called "Humour in Marina's Comedies" that considers ten plays that had been published when she was doing her research in the early 1990s. In a structure similar to Sudarkar's

[50] He also wrote novels under the pseudonym Bharanidharan.
[51] *Taṉi Kuṭittaṉam, Ūru Vampu, Kālkaṭṭu, Nērmai, Shanti Eṅkē, Māppiḷḷai Muṟukku,* and *Skylab Campanti.*
[52] *Toyvu,* Sudakar, M. V. *Marinavin Natakankal.* ("The Dramas of Marina") Chennai: Puram Publications, 1981, p. 3.
[53] Ibid.
[54] She uses *Āṉanta Vikaṭan, Kumutam, Kalki,* and *Tinamaṇi Katir* (Ferro-Luzzi, Gabriella Eichinger. *The Taste of Laughter: Aspects of Tamil Humour*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992, p. 183, Chapter 1, note 2).

work, which Ferro-Luzzi knew well, she has divided the chapter to discuss broad humorous themes and uses of language that are found in many dramas. She uses specific examples of jokes from plays to illustrate her categories, but her work is focused on Marina and his performances and published dramas, with nothing to indicate that he is part of the much larger trend of sabha drama. Within that field, Marina is particularly known for his fairly realistic portrayals of extended Brahmin families complete with stereotypical characters such as "the gossiping grandmother, the quarrelsome aunt, the meek daughter-in-law, the meddling woman next door, the retired wag, all the characters we meet in the course of our daily life,"[55] and the issue of the joint-family system versus the nuclear-family system. This issue has lost relevance in recent years, as is evidenced by the current lack of interest in Marina's plays. Fifteen years after Ferro-Luzzi did her research, when the plays were frequently performed, Marina's troupe was performing only a few plays a year. The one I saw was very poorly attended. A few of his plays were still available in book form in 2003, but his first and best-known play, *Ta<u>n</u>i Kuṭitta<u>n</u>am* ("Separate Family"), was out of print and no longer available for purchase.

A Brahmin Theater

One of the most distinctive features of the commercial theater in Chennai, and one that is almost never discussed, is that it is almost exclusively Brahmin at every level (writers, actors, technicians, producers, audience). The minority community that sabha plays target has a very distinct identity and a culture that has been carefully cultivated over the years since Independence. This fact is essential to understanding the genre and will be discussed in detail in the following chapters, though I will give a brief synopsis of Tamil Brahmin culture here.

[55] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* April 16, 2004.

The word "culture" has been designated (along with "history" and "power") as one of the "three key terms in the human sciences."[56] In fact, it is such a complex concept in academic thought that Nicholas Dirks was asked to convene an interdisciplinary conference to discuss why "the word *culture* [is] used so frequently, so provocatively, and for so many different purposes."[57] As it is generally used in Chennai, "culture" refers to the right way for things to be done and for people to behave and to be seen behaving, especially in relation to other members of society. Susan Seizer's informants believe "that only lifelong marital bonds *of the proper sort* constitute true 'Tamil culture' (emphasis in original),[58] and I have found marriage and family ties to be the primary components of "culture" in the contemporary Tamil context. "Culture" only expands to include religion and then classical music and dance[59] after this primary definition has been exhausted. There is an air of "distinction," to use Bourdieu's term, about culture, and the concept also implies hierarchy: these components of culture are something that Matthew Arnold's "men of culture"[60] follow, appreciate, and are capable of disseminating. The word "culture" itself carries connotations of high class and taste, and it is actually possible for an individual or group to *lose* "Tamil culture."[61] Members of society with "good taste" are those who adhere to and recognize performance of the unwritten rules of "culture," which are, for the most part, constructed and modeled by the minority Brahmin community in Chennai.

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[56] Dirks, Nicholas B., ed. *In Near Ruins: Cultural Theory at the End of the Century*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. vii.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Seizer 2005, p. 6.
[59] Classical music and dance are considered to *be* culture, whereas dramas simply *portray* culture through characters that behave (or don't) in accordance with cultural norms.
[60] Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy*. Edited by Samuel Lipman. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993.
[61] See Seizer 2005, p. 6.

Tamil Brahmins, due to the politics of the last century, have had compelling reasons to define and protect their unique culture, and one outlet was the sabha dramas. Tamilnadu is the seat of the Dravidian nationalist parties, which celebrated Tamil as a classical language and ancient culture on par with Sanskrit, and resented Brahmins as foreigners who imposed their culture on South Indians. The state was thus home to a powerful anti-Brahmin movement. When caste was still asked for on the census Brahmins made up less than 5% of the population,[62] but they have continued to dominate the majority population with their religious authority, economic power, political influence, and social prestige. They have been portrayed as foreign invaders, enemies, and hypocrites in the ideology of the Dravidian movement, which started around the 1910s and persists to some extent today.

Dravidian party politicians like C. N. Annadurai, M. Karunanidhi, and M. G. Ramachandran spread anti-Brahmin messages through literature, drama, and film.[63] These attacks led the Brahmins to respond in kind, reaffirming their values and banding together in the face of these antagonistic sentiments. Cho Ramasamy's later plays directly criticize the Dravidian party politicians and their policies, but most plays of the sabha drama tradition simply portray the everyday life of the middle-class Tamil Brahmin family. Unlike the Dravidian political dramas, which toured around to villages and were often made into films in an attempt to reach the largest possible mass audiences,[64] sabha dramas were very insular. There was no movement to justify the worth and contributions

[62] The last census that asked about caste was 1931. The percentage of Brahmins in the urban center of Chennai is likely to be higher than in the rural areas of the state, but it is still a very small, but visible, minority.

[63] See, for instance, Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr. *The Dravidian Movement.* Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965.and Irschick, Eugene. *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s.* Madras: Cre-A, 1986. These are also some of the men discussed in *Pioneers of the Tamil Drama Stage.*

[64] The trend of these social reform dramas subsided once they were made into films and the Dravidian party leaders were busy with political activities (see Rajendran 1989, pp. 9-10).

of the Tamil Brahmin community to the majority population; the sabha theater was developed instead. Live theater functioned as an outlet to affirm these values within the community itself to a like-minded audience. The plays were staged almost exclusively on Chennai's urban proscenium stages, with occasional tours within Tamilnadu and outside to perform for members of the Tamil Brahmin diaspora in other major cities.

Those within the sabha genre never really mention the Dravidian plays as one of the reasons they got involved in amateur theater. Instead they talk about college competitions, love of acting coupled with the desire for respectable career, interest in putting everyday language and characters on stage, and an ambition toward a career in film or television. V. Sreevathson, a recent entrant onto the sabha drama scene also mentioned "the revival of the Marathi theatre by youngsters in Mumbai" as an inspiration.[65] Contemporary sabha artistes often discuss their theater in contrast to films or the professional stage, but never the political plays of the Dravidian movement. Their plays have different audiences, different venues, and different purposes than those Dravidian plays which really moved into the rural areas and spread specific messages of political and social reform. Sabha plays, which do not tend to overtly address social development issues or include explicit messages, have the effect of humanizing a community that has been demonized by political opponents and allowing its members to maintain their self-respect and confidence.

What Type of Theater is This?

"Popular" theater is a misnomer for sabha theater because it implies a much greater mass appeal than actually exists, and "commercial" theater isn't entirely accurate either because it implies that the theater makes enough profit to be commercially viable.

[65] Pushpa Narayan, *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2004.

Even though these troupes are lucky to break even on performances, sabha theater is commercial in the sense that it takes audience tastes into account when developing productions. Perhaps "semi-commercial" or "consumer-oriented" would be more accurate descriptions of the genre. Some of the other common categories used to discuss dramatic genres can be useful in defining sabha theater. A few terms that immediately come to mind are "urban," "modern," "secular," and "amateur," but even these are not clear-cut and must be qualified.

Although the music and dance associated with sabhas can be indisputably categorized as "classical," the theater they promote is much more difficult to categorize. Kathryn Hansen's conception of "classical" arts very helpfully puts the usually dichotomous terms of "classical" and "folk" on a continuum. In her book *Grounds for Play* she categorizes the north Indian theater tradition of Nautanki as an "intermediary" theater.[66] It is rare that a performance art can be neatly slotted into either of the extreme categories, and Hansen's continuum is a productive way to consider sabha theater. Although sabha theater certainly has the patronage of the elite, it does not have professional performers, textual authority, or a standardized training method, all markers of a "classical" art. In addition, the patrons are often accidental ones who attend the theater because the tickets come free with a sabha membership purchased for the classical music performances.

The designation of "classical" is an important status marker in the city of Chennai. Amanda Weidman's informants

[66] Hansen, Kathryn. *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992.

> agreed that Karnatic music is 'more classical' now than it ever has been before….By 'classical,' they meant exclusive, associated with conservative cultural politics, composition-oriented, standardized, rule-bound.[67]

Depending on whether someone is from the (predominantly Brahmin) community that is associated with both Karnatic music and conservatism, this designation of "classical" could be either positive or negative, but it always carries connotations of good taste and high status. On January 13, 2003, *The Hindu* published the results of a poll where reporters had questioned 234 Chennai men and women (of indiscriminate age and caste) about their entertainment choices over the past three months and about their preferred destinations. Unsurprisingly, the top destinations in the past three months were the beach (79%), the movies (80%), and shopping malls (37%). Dramas were not on the list, but 7% of those polled had attended music concerts, 8% theme parks, and 1% each the temple and bowling alley. Given that so many people actually attended music concerts, it was interesting to note that only 3% of people listed that as their preferred entertainment, about the same number whose favorite outing is to temples, which ranked very low on the actual destination list (1%). The indication is that even though residents of Chennai don't particularly love to go to these concerts, they feel some sort of pressure to attend and be seen at them.

There is clearly an accepted opinion about which arts are considered to be in high or low taste, and the label "classical" is central to that distinction. In fact, the National Academy for Music, Dance, and Drama (Sangeet Natak Akademi) classifies particular dance forms as "classical" or "folk," and performers compete within these categories for the limited funding and government-sponsored performance opportunities. Yamini Krishnamurti, who danced both Bharata Natyam (a classical art) and Kuchipudi

[67] Weidman 2001, p. 354

(considered a folk art at that time) felt the prejudice against the folk categorization very strongly. In her autobiography *Passion for the Dance,* she illustrates this beautifully with an anecdote about her performance at, naturally enough, a science conference in New Delhi:

> I personally experienced this prejudice when I was almost denied permission to perform the Dasavataram in Kuchipudi at the first Science Conference in independent India in 1960…The officialdom told me: "The Committee does not want a folk form."[68]

After convincing the powers that were that the Dasavataram "revealed an ancient theory of evolution and was in tune with the spirit of the conference,"[69] she performed it. The performance was a great success and led to a flurry of research designed to establish the "classicism…antecedents and pedigree"[70] of Kuchipudi and revive the form in its regional home, Andhra Pradesh.

As far as drama goes, "classical drama" is itself an interesting concept in the Indian context. Milton Singer includes it in his list of "symbols of a modern Indian identity": "language, national history, archeological monuments, folk arts and crafts, classical music, dance, and drama."[71] This list is particularly interesting for this study because of the inclusion of "classical drama." What is classical drama to Milton Singer and his informants? His project, of identifying the "Great Tradition" of Hinduism, consciously privileges Sanskrit and Brahmanic sensibilities, but there is now and was then[72] very little Sanskrit drama performed in Madras City. In fact, it was Singer's chief informant V. Raghavan who began the tradition still followed by his daughter Nandini

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[68] Krishnamurti, Yamini. *A Passion for Dance: My Autobiography.* With Renuka Khandekar. New Delhi: Viking Press, 1995, p. 58.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., p. 60.
[71] Singer, Milton B. When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 59.
[72] Singer did most of his field research in the 1950s.

Ramani of producing one Sanskrit play per year under the name "Samskrita Ranga."[73] Raghavan himself defined "classical" with broadly descriptive phrases such as having "sophisticated rendering" or "high aesthetic standards."[74] These definitions apply more readily to music and dance than to drama, but still give some indication of Singer's intended meaning.

In contrast to the "legitimate" classical music and dance performances that are universally equated with good taste, no one considers sabha plays to be high culture. It is interesting that the very negative words (nonserious, superficial, inartistic, or merely popular)[75] used to describe "professional" theater came to be associated with this amateur theater. Going to see a Karnatic vocal concert may show "distinction" in Bourdieu's sense of a cultural practice that is coded with symbolic power and contributes to the persistence and reproduction of social systems of hierarchy and domination. Going to see *Jurassic Baby* performed by Crazy Creations most assuredly does not show distinction. Seeing a Magic Lantern production of a Dario Fo play or the Madras Players' version of *Twelfth Night* is far more distinguishing, and would never take place in a sabha, but rather in the Museum Theatre or at a dinner theater venue on the beach. I was continually advised by Chennai elites to study folk and activist dramas and to forget about sabha plays. However, because they take place within the scripted space of the sabha and with the sanction of those organizations and their members by virtue of being

[73] The actors are primarily Sanskrit teachers from around the city and they go to the annual Kalidas Festival in Ujjain to perform. Usually they will also do one staging of the play in Madras, in one of the smaller halls in Mylapore. I had the good fortune to see a dress rehearsal of *Malavikagnimitra* in 2003 before the group's trip to Ujjain, but missed the January 2004 performance in Chennai. As far as I know, this single annual performance is the only Sanskrit drama to be found in the city.
[74] Singer 1972, p. 183.
[75] Dharwadker 2005, p. 43.

placed on the schedule and often very well-attended, sabha dramas cannot be dismissed as they so often are by intellectuals.

The Sabha Drama Debate

Many elites in the city lament the state of "Tamil drama today," reminiscing nostalgically about the plays that used to be done in Chennai. Most are nostalgic for the professional troupes that staged mythological and historical dramas that were considered serious productions with intricate sets and costumes and scripted in a more formal language than the current plays. K. P. Arivanatham, who began his theater career working with M. R. Radha when he was twelve years old, then went on to write plays for the T. K. S. Brothers and R. S. Manohar, told me that now plays are "*sumaa* satire, wits, jokes." Yes, the audience can be "jolly for a short time, but the mind doesn't have to work. No strain."[76] He particularly mentioned Y. Gee. Mahendran, Kathadi Ramamurthy, and Crazy Mohan as artists of this lighter type. Similarly, Prasad, who produces a television program called "Tamil Oli" ("The Sound of Tamil") for the Tamil Television Network (TTN) and writes for Tamil magazines *Kuṅkumam* and *Kaṇaiyāḻi*, told me that popular theater in Chennai today is "pure entertainment based" and that there is no cultural progress. People just go to laugh at plays with S. Ve. Shekher, T. V. Varadarajan, and others like them. Unlike Arivanatham, however, Prasad mentioned Kathadi Ramamurthy (along with Purnam Viswanathan, Indira Parthasarathy, and K. S. Nagarajan) as having some social message in his work.[77]

Criticism of sabha theater in both common parlance and the press uses a language of disintegration or stagnation that distinguishes today's plays from those of the 1960s.

[76] "Just satire, wits, jokes." (Interview November 26, 2003.)
[77] Interview, November 26, 2003.

The number of sabhas that support dramas in the city has declined over the years, and among the many reasons put forth for this development are those associated with the quality of the plays. Suggestions are made that the sabha plays have either gone downhill or not developed at all; that the artists are simply presenting audiences with basically the same play over and over. Kausalya Santhanam, the *Hindu's* theater critic, has written numerous articles to that effect. Her articles on the sabha theater genre are titled "When Will They Try to be Different?" and "Caught in the Formula Trap,"[78] for example.

The other major criticism that crops up with reference to sabha theater is that it is "vulgar," an accusation that nearly all performance arts in India have dealt with at one time or another.[79] Most actors and dancers in India face stigma because of their nature as public performers, because of the communities they are from, and/or because of the jokes that they tell. One way that producers and patrons of the sabha theater productions in Chennai assert their superiority over folk drama and commercial films is to focus on the *purity* of their plays. Monika Mehta has pointed out in her work on film censorship that purity as an ideal has had a long and complex relationship with the idea of "Indian culture" in the ongoing conceptualization of "India" as a nation. Purity is posited as the opposite of vulgarity, and in discourses about film sequences that "should" be subject to censorship, the vulgar is construed as "that which was corrupting, violent, and obscene; in short, sexuality."[80] This definition of the vulgar links purity, as its opposite, with prudishness or modesty, as the opposites of sexuality.

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[78] May 10, 2002 and May 18, 2001. In the former she writes, "Attending the Kodai Nataka Vizha of the Kartik Fine Arts at the RR Sabha Hall is like traveling in a time capsule to the past. The musicians playing familiar tunes in the pit and the sets, jokes and the format of the plays that remain almost unchanged. Is it nostalgia that brings in the viewers—that comforting cloak of familiarity?"

[79] A few examples are Bharata Natyam, Nautanki, Kathak, Special Drama, Kuchipudi, and Bhavai.

[80] Mehta, Monika. "What is Behind Film Censorship? The *Khalnayak* Debates." *Jouvert* 5, no.3 (2001): 1-9, p. 3. Viewed on 1/11/02 at http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v513/mehta.htm.

The discussion between the two main factions of the Tamil Brahmin community about the value and propriety of the sabha theater reveals a lot about how this group constructs its identity. This is true even within the acting community. It is difficult for actors to perform in film and theater simultaneously now due to the uncertainty of film shooting schedules and the need to commit to times and dates for live theater. Many of them still manage, though, and many more will do work for television, which has a more regular schedule than film. It is ironic, therefore, that stage actors will often draw a distinction between themselves and film actors, saying that they themselves are the better actors. It is true that film or television scenes can always be shot again and that they are done in short takes that require very little memorization. In fact, they require no knowledge of Tamil since an actor can memorize one line at a time for the camera or actually have the voice dubbed in later by someone else. However, because many drama artists also act in films, they are really criticizing themselves. The true amateurs who work for a bank or the railways during the day do not have time for more than the occasional play, but actors who are trying to make a living need to work in the better-paying mass media industries to do so. Live theater is still a stepping stone for those industries, although not nearly on the scale that it used to be. The other contrasts Brahmins draw between sabha theater and popular film are often based on differences in the perceived audiences of the two forms. I will now analyze some of this dialogue and look particularly at the negotiations and compromises in the humor of the plays.

The sabha genre favors comedies, and as Susan Seizer has astutely discerned, "[t]he historiography of modern Tamil drama stresses comedy as the most vulgar aspect

of drama."[81] I see three separate fears associated with vulgarity in the arts that are visible in the dialogues about sabha dramas. One is the idea that people will imitate what they see on stage or screen and thus be corrupted by these ideas and images. A second is that Indian "culture" will itself be corrupted and lose its status in the eyes of the world. If "culture" is represented in such a way *within* the community, there is also the fear that the inappropriate behavior observed in the media will be imitated and become normative and accepted, thus actually *changing* the culture, whose composition and definition are dependent on the actions of its community members. The third and related fear is that the community that produced the offending film, play, or song will be represented to the outside world as vulgar or corrupt. It is therefore logical that modesty is an externally visible sign of both (good) taste and middle-class identity, a connection drawn by Purnima Mankekar in her work on television[82] but evident even during the colonial period.[83]

Sabha theater and its performers have not escaped the association of the performance arts with vulgarity. Being of high social status, however, these performers choose to get involved in theater as a hobby, rather than as a livelihood necessitated by poverty, and they respond not by going on the defensive as so many folk performers do, but by going on the offensive. S. Ve. Shekher has acknowledged that some of his jokes are considered to be in bad taste:

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[81] Seizer 1997, p. 4.
[82] See Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.
[83] Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 125, 127, 131. "Common" women were seen as "coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males" (127) and "Westernized" women were seen as "brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous" (131). The middle-class woman, on the other hand, embodied the opposites of all these undesirable characteristics. The divide is also seen clearly within the arts in the debates about the acceptable repertoire of Bharata Natyam in the reform-oriented work of Rukmini Devi Arundale.

> It is complained that my jokes are vulgar. Now, I do admit there may be a joke here or there, which may be described as vulgar. But, vulgarity takes its full form, not on the joke cracked, but on the reaction to the joke. The vulgarity will not manifest if the reaction is bland. I have a family audience. A whole family attends my show. I can't offend their values with my jokes, which are often referred to as "vulgar."[84]

He recognizes that he pushes the boundaries of good taste, but argues that his jokes are not vulgar unless the audience interprets them as such, which children, for example, would not do. Therefore, these plays are in good taste and suitable for family entertainment and the burden of "vulgarity" is placed on the audience.[85]

To counter these accusations of vulgarity, sabha drama fans consistently employ two lines of defense. The first is that these plays, especially in relation to other available entertainments in the city, are "clean," "healthy," and suitable for family viewing. The second is that sabha dramas are relaxing and remove working people from the stress of their everyday lives.

The values that are repeatedly asserted—"clean," "healthy," and suitable for the entire family to enjoy—are central to the self-circumscription of this community of conservative, middle-class Brahmin fans. The labels are used to distinguish those who choose this sort of entertainment from those who enjoy humor based on sexual innuendo and double entendre, both common devices in films and folk dramas (Special Drama, for example) that are targeted at a broader (that is, lower) audience in terms of both caste and

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[84] Gopalie, S. "Metro Amateur Theatre (1965-1985): A Project Report." Senior Fellowship of Cultural Ministry, 2002, p. 233.

[85] This argument echoes that of devadasi (female dancers and musicians from hereditary performance communities) T. Balasaraswati in her debate with Brahmin dancer Rukmini Devi Arundale about the performance of *sringara rasa* (erotic sentiment). Rukmini Devi "reformed" the traditional dances by eliminating any movements or lyrics she saw as too erotic. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, believed that purity and devotion to god within the dancer's heart purified the movements and lyrics and raised them to the level of spirit (see Balasaraswati, T. "On Bharatanatyam" (T. Balasaraswati's presidential address at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, Madras, on December 21, 1975). Translated from the Tamil by S. Guhan in *Sangeet Natak* (Vol. 72-3, April-September,1984): 8-13.

class. Upper-middle and middle-class filmmakers[86] interviewed by Sara Dickey tended to "portray the bulk of cinema viewers—the 'mass,' as they are frequently called—as having narrow, unsophisticated, and even prurient interests in movies."[87] These filmmakers talk about their own aesthetic or creative fulfillment and their desire to do films with "clean stories" or "social messages," but because those films tend to flop, they feel forced to "compromise" and provide fantasy, comedy, and songs.[88] Sabha theater actor A. R. Srinivasan understands that films need to do good business, and feels fortunate to be in the theater, where they have a small but "decent" audience and therefore no compulsion to be vulgar or "pander to low taste."[89]

Even though sabha theater prides itself on its cleanliness, there are still jokes about sex in a few of these plays. In place of the "vulgar" and inappropriate banter between a bachelor and an unmarried "Dancer" character that dominates Special Drama[90] or the elaborate courting and vamp characters of film[91] are jokes about the first night of a marriage. The main difference between sabha theater and the folk or cinema media is the level of physical interaction between male and female actors. Susan Seizer writes that "[b]road physical comedy characterizes the Buffoon-Dance Duet."[92] This standard Special *Nāṭakam* scene is constructed around the highly improbable plot of an unmarried woman who is dancing alone in the middle of the road accidentally "bumping" into a young man. The humor relies on "exaggerated gestures, mockery, and extreme

[86] Dickey is referring to both directors and producers of films with this term (Dickey, Sara. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 119).
[87] Ibid., p. 126.
[88] Ibid., pp. 126-7.
[89] My interview with A. R. Srinivasan, May 14, 2004.
[90] See Seizer, Susan. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005.
[91] See Dwyer, Rachel. All You Want is Money, All You Need is Love: Sexuality and Romance in Modern India. London: Cassell, 2000.
[92] Seizer 2005, p. 203.

characterizations"[93] in addition to the sexually suggestive language. These comic scenes are interludes in the otherwise very proper drama in which the actors stand fairly still at the front of the stage and direct their speech towards the audience. Film song and dance sequences are similar to these comedy tracks in that the characteristic of lacking discipline could apply equally to both. Film song sequences, like comic interludes, are often out of order, full of fantasy, unreality, and abrupt shifts. They also serve as a space in which to push boundaries of propriety, allowing the actor and actress more physical interaction than the regular story line. Both of these examples involve *unmarried* couples and the story may end with a love marriage.

It is at this point in the narrative that sabha theater can offer something different. The unmarried characters of film and folk drama may flirt and interact in a culturally inappropriate manner, but it ends there. Sabha drama, on the other hand, promotes the middle-class domestic space as the one safe enough, and acceptable enough, to deal with the topic of sex in marriage.[94] This is both on the level of audience, perceived to be middle-class families, and the characters, who are conceptualized the same way. These sequences are admittedly rare in the corpus of plays, but most frequently and explicitly found in the work of S. Ve. Shekher, a comedian who deliberately pushes the boundaries of Brahmin propriety. It is these "innuendoes of dialogue, mostly of an adolescent kind, [that] sustain their plays," writes K. S. Rajendran.[95]

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[93] Ibid., p. 203.
[94] John, Mary E. "Globalisation, Sexuality, and the Visual Field: Issues and Non-Issues for Cultural Critique." In *A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India*, edited by Janaki Nair and Mary E. John, 368-396. New York: Zed Books, 1999. (originally published in Delhi by Kali for Women in 1998) and Kakar, Sudhir. *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1989 also use the conjugal couple as a starting point for "an exploration of the ideology of sexuality (John, p. 371)."
[95] Rajendran 1989, p. 160.

During Crazy Creations' 25th Anniversary function in the fall of 2003, two prominent Brahmin women, vanguards of tradition through the performing arts, praised the troupe for their efforts in keeping entertainment "pure." Praising the purity of the plays is the primary way that producers and patrons of the Sabha theater productions in the city assert their superiority, especially over popular genres such as commercial film and television. At the Narada Gana Sabha on October 2, 2003, respected Bharata Natyam dancer Dr. Padma Subramanian said that Crazy Mohan's biggest achievement has been to write comedy for twenty-five years without resorting to sex or violence, and her words got a standing ovation from the audience. She said that he includes "all innocent jokes" and lots of family relations themes that make for "healthy entertainment."

This phrase, "healthy entertainment," combines the two lauded characteristics of the sabha dramas: it is both healthy *and* entertaining. Watching these plays, the audience members can laugh, forget their worries, and not think at all for two precious hours. These benefits are in opposition to the enjoyment derived from watching classical music or dance, which are never a laughing matter and require great concentration as well as education. In fact, I interviewed a psychiatrist, Dr. Mathrabootham, who prescribes sabha dramas to his depressed patients. He says that not only does it get them outside the house, among other people who are enjoying themselves, but it makes them laugh, which is surely the best medicine he can offer.[96]

In her October 2, 2003 address, Dr. Subramanian reminded the audience of this medical need to laugh in order to remain healthy, and credited Crazy Mohan's plays with being both medically and morally beneficial for viewers. She acknowledged the

[96] Interview, July 29, 2003.

gargantuan nature of this task by thinking about her own medium of classical dance, saying that humor, "hasya," is by far the most difficult rasa to perform. Similarly, at the September 28, 2003 function for the same occasion at Rani Seethai Hall, founder and dean of the Padma Sheshadri School in T. Nagar, Mrs. Y. G. Parthasarathy, talked about the relationship between *tairiyam* (courage) and *paittiyam* (madness). Crazy Mohan's plays, she said, are examples of "healthy humor," and the audience feels good both during and after the play. He never employs double meanings, and writes very clean scripts. She likened lead actor Crazy Balaji to her late husband Y. G. Parthasarathy, the founder of United Amateur Artists, calling him a "full dramatist" who sacrificed everything to devote himself fully to the stage.[97] "Senseless comedy lightens our minds," she said, turning the primary criticism of this genre into a compliment.

Most intellectuals say that entertainment should be instructive to be worth watching. They claim to want to see messages and morals in their plays. This was, in fact, the principle of the early television serials that were known as "pro-development soap operas," and designed to promote various developmental initiatives such as family planning and adult literacy.[98] Mrs. Y. G. P. and others like her, however, see value in entertainment that simply releases the viewer from daily stresses. As long as the humor is clean and doesn't actually negatively affect viewers, they argue that there is nothing wrong with its being frivolous and senseless.

In addition, Mrs. Y. G. P. praised Crazy Mohan's dialogues and the other actors in the troupe, saying that he puts pressure on the interpreter/actor. Because the stage is

[97] Crazy Balaji, although dedicated to the stage, is also a comedy actor on television.
[98] See Singhal, Arvind, and Everett M. Rogers. *India's Communication Revolution: From Bullock Carts to Cyber Marts.* New Delhi: Sage, 2001.

such a powerful medium, it is important that the jokes and the messages are healthy and appropriate, and Crazy Mohan's work is. For this reason she counts herself one of his fans who love to see the plays again and again. She praised *Jurassic Baby* in particular as a fantastic play because it is so beloved by children, adding that it is wonderful for kids, so clean and healthy, and different from TV. It is also a very good way for families to spend time together, and she encouraged parents to take their kids to the theater and enjoy the medium. "We need these plays in these 'crazy times,'" she concluded, referring to the aesthetics and characteristics of sabha dramas in general, not just Crazy Mohan.

Conclusion

The sabha dramas have been shaped by these debates as well as by the community that engages in them. They are performed primarily by amateur actors on the proscenium stages in the urban center of Chennai. I describe these plays as "semi-commercial" because they take the tastes of the audience into account when developing storylines, characters, and jokes, but the drama troupes do not usually earn money, tending to breaking even at best on performances.

The sabha genre was one of the innovative Indian-Western hybrid genres that started in the 1950s in post-Independence India. Its major influence was the work of lawyer Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, who openly emulated the style of the English-language plays performed by Europeans in Chennai. He started a Tamil-language drama troupe of educated elites in the late nineteenth century and shifted the emphasis of Tamil dramas from song, costume, set, and spectacle to dialogue and acting, combining Dravidian and European stories, characters, and aesthetics. While he has been called the "Father of Modern Tamil Drama" by noted scholars, the sabha theater of educated

amteurs that he so inspired has not found a secure place in the scholarship of Tamil drama. Its absence in this corpus reflects the non-acceptance of the art form into the world of respectable performance arts in Chennai regardless of its association with the elite patrons and sabha billing alongside classical music and dance genres.

When it began in the 1950s, the sabha drama genre not only continued the theatrical tradition started by Mudaliyar, which defined itself against the professional Tamil theater that borrowed heavily from the Parsi theater tradition, but also expressed a reaction to the anti-Brahmin ideology and the Dravidian political dramas prominent in the early- to mid-twentieth century. The commercial theater in Chennai is almost exclusively Brahmin at every level (writers, actors, technicians, producers, audience) and the sabha dramas serve to define and protect the unique culture of this community.

This alternative function of the sabha plays that I am suggesting has not been part of the debate that surrounds them. That debate has focused on the standard entertainment versus educational benefits of the medium. Sabha artists create plays that they consider healthy and entertaining, not intellectual or activist. This declared emphasis has led to the simultaneous validation and disdain for the plays by members of the educated elite. Even those who are belong to one of the cultural organizations known as sabhas and either directly or indirectly support this type of theater in Chennai often criticize it. The Tamil Brahmins in Chennai and the cultural organizations that they belong to have had an enormous effect on the genre of sabha theater, providing both audiences and performance opportunities over the years. The sabhas play a key role in the creation of ideas about good taste in the city of Chennai. The following chapter takes a closer look at the way

sabhas work, their membership and its particular concerns, and the financing of dramas and other entertainments.

Chapter Two

SABHAS: ART PATRONAGE AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF TASTE IN CHENNAI

Defining Sabha

The word "sabha" simply means "association" or "organization," and it was commonly used all over India in a manner similar to the words *majlis, mehfil,* and *jalsa* to convey the general sense of a public function, recital, or performance.

> These usages refer to the cultural gatherings held in the outer, public rooms of wealthy patrons, wherein poetry was recited and/or dance and musical expertise displayed.[1]

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries another use of the word "sabha" became very popular with reference to drama. Not only were the performances referred to as sabhas, but the plays themselves. The most famous of this genre was the *Indar Sabha.* This play was designed as a performance within a performance. The audience in the theater watched the character of Indra, King of the Gods, enjoying musical performances at his court ("sabha"). The play, written entirely in verse, had no divisions of acts or scenes and was basically a collection of songs held together by a thread of a story. When it was made into a film in 1932, the 211 minute production included seventy-one songs.[2] The *Indar Sabha,* as printed text, stage drama, rare book, set of recorded songs, and film, was popular for more than one hundred years in a number of different languages[3] and inspired many other plays based on the same principle. This genre of plays was referred to as *sabhai natak* ("sabha drama") in Urdu literary history

[1] "The *Indar Sabha* Phenomenon: Public Theatre and Consumption in Greater India (1853-1956)" in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India.* Edited by Christopher Pinney and Rachel Dwyer. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001: 76-114, p. 84.
[2] Ibid., p. 105.
[3] See Hansen 2001, especially pp. 97-99.

and differs greatly from the sabha dramas I am discussing in the context of present-day Tamilnadu.[4]

The word sabha was associated not just with particular plays, but also with Tamil drama *troupes* well before India's independence and the beginning of the sabha theater that Tangarasu and I refer to (for example, Sambanda Mudaliyar's troupe was called Suguna Vilasa *Sabha*). The Suguna Vilasa Sabha and other such troupes[5] would remain at a single theater and stage several plays over a fixed period of time. They took advantage of being in one place for a while by using elaborate sets. "Sabha theater," on the other hand, involves troupes traveling to a different stage within the city of Chennai for each performance in accordance with the schedule arranged for them by cultural organizations called "sabhas."

"Sabhas" are private cultural organizations in Chennai that organize and sponsor classical music and dance performances along with some dramas and the occasional film, debate, or religious discourse. They have been the dominant patrons of the arts in the city since the 1928 founding of the Music Academy of Madras as part of the Annual Congress Party Meeting.[6] The sabhas organize entertainment for their members, whose fees vary based on the particular sabha,[7] the hall that they use for their performances,[8] where the

[4] "These dramas are designated as *sabhai natak* in Urdu literary histories and have received ample treatment by Gupta (1981: 227-36), Husain (1990: 71-9), Rizvi (1957: 121-32), and Ibrahim Yusuf (1980: 52-71, 307-9)" (Hansen 2001, p. 108, note 22).

[5] There are descriptions of many of these troupes in Saktiperumal. *Tamiḷ Nāṭaka Varalāṟu.* ("History of Tamil Drama"). Madurai: Vancikko Pathipakam, 1979. A few examples are the Mangala Bala Gana Sabha, N. S. K. Nataka Sabha, Sakti Nataka Sabha, and the Devi Nataka Sabha.

[6] I am taking this date from Arudra 1997. On pages 2-3 he explains that although there was a music conference held in 1927 in conjunction with the Congress Party Meeting that inspired the idea of "a permanent institution to promote the cause of music," the Music Academy was not formally inaugurated until 1928. Other scholars (Weidman 2001, Singer 1972) have dated the Music Academy to 1927.

[7] The Parthasarathy Swami Sabha has worked hard to keep its fees low and still offers a lifetime membership for 150 rupees, approximately $3.50 (see Iyengar, Geetha. "Sabhanayaka: M. Krishnamurthy, Parthasarathy Swami Sabha," 2003. Viewed on November 29, 2005 at http://carnatica.net/nvr/partha-sabha.htm.) Other sabhas may charge ten times that, but these membership fees are still minimal

seats are in the theater, and on how long a commitment the member makes (seasonal, one year, lifetime membership, and so on). Each sabha has its own identity and focus based on the tastes of the founders and response of members to each year's schedule. "At the beginning of the twenty-first century," wrote Amanda Weidman, "this idea has been carried to such an extreme that many concert-goers identify the type of music-lover they are by the sabhas whose concerts they attend; even though for the most part all the sabhas feature the same musicians, one makes a social statement by choosing where one goes to hear them."[9]

Cultural organizations such as sabhas are key players along with the press and academics in creating a notion of "good" taste in Chennai, and all three are dominated by the Brahmin community, which thus both constructs and embodies the idea of good taste dominant in the city.[10] This chapter will show the mechanisms by which taste is created through the sabhas and how these values are then dispersed throughout the city and on into local as well as international communities.

Before there were formal sabhas with paid memberships, tickets, and performance halls with proscenium stages, there were neighborhood associations that gathered in homes and community halls to sing devotional songs. Most sabhas started this way, as "community organizations, established by groups of concerned citizens, usually

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considering ticket prices for individual concerts or for the Annual Music Festival. The Parthasarathy Swami Sabha charges between 15 and 100 rupees ($.35 - $2.33) for a daily ticket and between 300 and 1000 rupees ($6.98 - $23.26) for a season ticket. The Krishna Gana Sabha charges twice that (see http://www.chennaionline.com/musicseason99/sabhainfo.asp.).

[8] See Appendix A for a list of commonly-used halls along with their amenities, capacity, and the price of an evening's rental in 2001.

[9] Weidman, Amanda. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 80-1.

[10] See Anand, S. *Brahmans and Cricket: Lagaan's Millenial Purana and Other Myths.* Chennai: Navayana, 2003 on journalism and Hancock, Mary Elizabeth. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999, Singh, A. Neighborhood and Networks in Urban India. Delhi: Marwah, 1976, and Irschick, Eugene. *Tamil Revivalism in the 1930s.* Madras: Cre-A, 1986 on higher education.

Brahmins, with the idea of providing music to the neighborhood."[11] The Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, for example, was founded in 1900 by a Mandyam Iyengar named Manni Thirumalachariar, who "felt the need for an association to conduct bhajans and Harikatha regularly for the local community."[12] There were fifty original members of the Parthasarathy Swami Sabha in Triplicane, most of whom lived on Thirumalachariar's street.[13]

The focus on music performance in Madras began as early as 1883, when a branch of the Gayan Samaj was founded in Madras for the "improvement and revival of Indian music."[14] Even at this early stage, distinctions were being made between music that was "classical" and that which was "vulgar," terms borrowed from discussions about language that were ongoing in this period.[15] After 1858[16] the British were actively recruiting Brahmins instead of Vellalas[17] for civil service positions, so members of this community flocked to Madras city and began gaining in political and social influence. In addition to the Gayan Samaj, the Madras of the 1880s saw the founding of the Indian National Congress, the Madras Mahajana Sabha, and the Theosophical Society, all of

[11] Weidman, Amanda J. "On the Subject of 'Classical' Music in South India." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2001, p. 104. L'Armand and L'Armand wrote in 1978 that "[t]he largest number [of Madras sabhas] still are recognized as Brahmin organizations" (L'Armand, Kathleen, and Adrian L'Armand. "Music in Madras: The Urbanization of a Cultural Tradition." In *Eight Urban Musical Cultures: Tradition and Change*, edited by Bruno Nettl, 115-145. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978, p. 129).
[12] Iyengar 2003.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Weidman 2001, p. 6
[15] Caldwell, Robert. *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages.* 3rd ed. Edited and revised by J.L. Wyatt. New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1974, pp. 78-81.
[16] This is the year that India officially came under the British Crown, one year after the so-called "Sepoy Mutiny." See Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr., and Stanley A. Kochanek. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation.* 6th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000, pp. 32-3 for more information on this.
[17] Vellalas are a land-owning non-Brahmin caste.

which were dominated by Smarta Brahmins.[18] The proceedings of the Gayan Samaj articulated that the organization desired "to distinguish between the 'disgusting songs sung by low castes' and 'Hindu music,' the system of music elaborated in Sanskrit treatises, and to teach the latter scientifically."[19] A further goal, shared by most of the above organizations, was to revive regional arts and project them as pan-Indian.

Chennai's influence in the arts and its predominance on the Indian performing art scene[20] have been acknowledged for many years, at least since the city began to grow in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a center of colonial administration and commerce. It attracted merchants, landholders, and Brahmins, and with the subsequent increase in wealth, the city also became a center of musical patronage. Musicians moved to Madras city from princely states, particularly from Tanjavur, in great numbers between 1850 and 1920 as the monarchs lost power and money, and with them the ability to

[18]Smarta Brahmins identify themselves as "followers of Sankara (AD 788-820), believers in monistic or Advaitavedanta who are supposed to conform to *smriti* traditions" (Singer, Milton B. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 63). This distinguishes them from Srivaishnavas, Madhvas, and Saivasiddhantins. Mary Elizabeth Hancock writes that "Smarta identity is also a product of the homogeneities that arise through the preferred styles of interaction among these different paradigmatic persons. These homogeneities are represented in bodily dispositions and 'tastes', on the basis of which Smartas distinguish their worship styles and by extension, themselves, from non-Brahman and non-Hindu modes of action and personhood. For example, they cite their own preferences for cooling foods and unguents…These and other aesthetic inflections of identity are media with which Smartas substantiate and represent themselves" (Hancock, Mary Elizabeth. "Women at Work: Ritual and Cultural Identity Among Smarta Brahmans of Madras." Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1990, p. 105). Also see Jackson, William J. *Tyagaraja and the Renewal of Tradition.* Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1994 for an in-depth analysis of the community throughout history.

[19] Weidman 2001, p. 6.

[20] This is not the case with the visual arts. Although the first visual arts college in India was founded in Madras in 1850, most of the art galleries and museums are found in Delhi and Mumbai, and many famous art schools and artists are in Bengal and Baroda. Many South Indian visual artists feel that they are being left out of what is rapidly becoming an international art scene (personal correspondence with R. B. Bhaskaran, former president of the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Madras, and Chairman of the National Lalit Kala Akademi from 2003-2008 and Justin Marx, Director of Kala Fine Art).

support the arts. This trend continued so that today, Karnatic music is "almost entirely centralized"[21] in the city of Chennai.

The project of providing music to Madras neighborhoods became more formal than the small gatherings hosted by neighborhood sabhas when, in 1912,[22] Brahmins began sponsoring Music Conferences every few years in a conscious attempt to "define and standardize"[23] the classical music of India. Even this early on, "classical" and "vulgar" music were intricately linked with and distinguished between the audiences for the two types of music. Not surprisingly, these discussions were held among members of the middle and upper classes who considered themselves refined and their musical tastes "classical," while music popular among members of the lower classes was categorized as "vulgar" and looked down upon. Audiences heavily favored the elite because the sabhas required an audience "of a certain economic class, one that not only had the concept of music as a leisure-time activity (part of 'culture' and 'tradition,' not a money-making career), but could also afford to pay for it."[24] So although music was being promoted as a universal language of aesthetics by "the Brahmin music establishment,"[25] it was in actuality divided into several different types such as classical, vulgar, devotional, and later, film. The organizations that propagated these divisions were primarily the Brahmin-founded and run music colleges, sabhas, and press that framed Karnatic music "within a thoroughly culturalist discourse where it operates as a sign of culture, tradition,

[21] L'Armand and L'Armand, p. 115
[22] Sambamoorthy, P. *History of Indian Music.* 2nd ed. Madras: Indian Music Publishing House, 1982, p. 238.
[23] Weidman 2001, p. 6.
[24] Ibid., p. 104.
[25] See Weidman 2006 for an in-depth discussion on the use of the analogy of music to language and the way it played out in the debate between the Tamil music movement and the Brahmin music establishment. She reframes the debate in a footnote in this way: "These two choices—between voice as a cultivated, aestheticized instrument and voice as a representation of self—may be considered in relation to, respectively, Sanskritic rasa theory and Tamil bhakti discourse" (Weidman 2006, p. 310 note 2).

refinement, and Brahmin middle-class identity."[26] Through this and similar processes, that Brahmin middle-class identity has been linked to national ideas of culture, tradition, and refinement. These "cultural policy makers" as Milton Singer calls patrons, organizers, and critics of performance arts, helped to set the standards of public taste and criticism.[27]

Many of the earliest sabhas were in the northern part of Madras known as Sowcarpet, Mint, Georgetown, Black Town, or just "Town," which was "the business and commercial heartland [of Madras] until the 1960s."[28] The prevalence of sabhas in the area led P. Sambamoorthy to write in 1960 that "Mint Street was and still is literally the Musical Grub Street of Madras."[29] Shortly after that, however, the scene began to change as wealthy Telugu Chetti music patrons moved out of the Mint Street area[30] and Brahmins from rural areas who had been affected by the 1961 land reforms[31] moved to the city and became prominent patrons of classical music. In the decade following the land reforms, the population of Madras City increased by almost 800,000 (42.8%).[32] The new Brahmins tended to congregate around the large temples in the city in areas such as Triplicane and Mylapore that were already Brahmin-dominated or settled in developing outer suburbs such as Adyar and Besant Nagar. Mylapore and Triplicane were already

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[26] Ibid., p. 110.
[27] See Singer 1972, p. 74.
[28] Ramachander, S. "The Narrow Road to the North" in *The Hindu Business Line, Internet Edition.* April 30, 2004. Viewed November 29, 2005 at http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2004/04/30/stories/2004043000090200.htm. Also see the maps provided in Figure 2 and Figure 3.
[29] Sambamoorthy 1982, p. 146. Early North Madras sabhas included the Krishna Gana Sabha (not the present-day one), the Bhagavath Katha Prasanga Sabha, and the Bhakti Marga Prasanga Sabha (Sambamoorthy 1982, p. 149). Amanda Weidman also lists the Punarvarasu Sabha, the Indian Fine Arts Society, and the Katchaleeswarar Gana Sabha (Weidman 2001, pp. 103-5).
[30] Weidman 2006, p. 81.
[31] See Beteille, Andre. Caste, Class, and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1965.
[32] Hancock 1990, p. 47.

centers of culture with a number of sabhas, but new ones sprung up in those areas during the 1960s as others closed in Georgetown.[33] These areas of the city thereafter "monopolised all commerce, art, culture, media, civil administration, economic prosperity and public life in the city."[34]

Sabhas are still neighborhood organizations, as members usually live near the performance hall and often know many of the other members in advance of joining. The Brahmin-dominated neighborhood of Mylapore was an early home to many sabhas such as the Thyagaraja Sangeetha and Vidwat Samajam and is where they are still concentrated. The small geographic area of Mylapore is currently home to the Mylapore Fine Arts Club, the Rasika Ranjini Sabha, Narada Gana Sabha, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, and Rani Seethai Hall, just to name a few. Triplicane used to be another drama hotbed in the city, but its prominence has faded. The Parthasarathy Swami Sabha is still around but Triplicane Fine Arts has folded. In the mid-1940s and 50s the wealthy neighborhood of Thyagaraja ("T.") Nagar became the other major theater neighborhood in the city with the founding of such organizations as the Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha and Krishna Gana Sabha.[35] The number of sabhas in that area continues to expand and now includes the Vani Mahal and Bharat Kalachar, among others. There are two or three other halls scattered throughout the city (such as the Annamalai Mandram near Parry's Corner and the government-run Kalaivanar Arangam on Warangal Road) but the venues are heavily concentrated in Mylapore and T. Nagar.[36] These two neighborhoods are the theater and

[33] Some, like the Indian Fine Arts Society, chose to relocate from Georgetown to Thyagaraja Nagar. See Weidman 2006, p. 81.
[34] Ramachander 2004.
[35] Weidman's research revealed that this newer neighborhood was home to many "nouveau-riche residents [who] were distinguished more by their wealth than their caste" (2006, p. 81).
[36] The most famous of the sabha theater artists also live in these areas. S. Ve. Shekher, Crazy Mohan, Kathadi Ramamurthy, K. S. Nagarajan, V. S. Raghavan, and the Tamil Brahmin Association

classical performance neighborhoods of the city in the same way that Kodambakkam is the center of the Tamil film world, earning the industry the name Kollywood.

Many sabha secretaries have noted a cultural divide in Chennai between the northern (Georgetown) and southern (Mylapore) parts of the city that illuminates part of what is unique about the post-Independence sabha theater. There was a substantial shift in the content and style of the plays performed in sabhas around the time of independence, and the reasons for that shift are many, including cultural, political, and financial explanations. Sabhas are concentrated, as stated above, in "South Chennai,"[37] and the audience found in these Brahmin neighborhoods was very different from the non-Brahmin audiences found, for instance, near Parry's Corner at the Annamalai Mandram. S. Gopalie, theater artist and former producer of Doordarshan's drama series in Chennai, has addressed this phenomenon and the consequences it has had on the content of sabha dramas in the introduction to his thesis:

> The South Madras Sabhas were mostly Brahmin-oriented, both at the level of administration and at the level of audience. Since most of the plays were with the Brahmin audience, the plays were more readily accepted. The North Madras Sabhas were of another kind. They held an advantage of a floating population who might visit theatre till it got the next train or bus to return to their village or town.
>
> There are certain plays that are more readily acceptable by the South Madras audience, which simply fail with North Madras audiences. While the South Madras audience identified in a way with the family represented on the stage (Brahmin) the North Madras audience watched it as a piece of curiosity, an endistanced lucretian look.[38]

(TAMBRAAS) are all located in the Mylapore area. Y. Gee Mahendran, A. R. Srinivasan, and Marina are all in T. Nagar. Kovai Pattu of Goodwill Stage still lives in Triplicane.

[37] As you can see from the map (Figure 2), this designation is no longer entirely accurate. The city has expanded since the 1970s to the south (Besant Nagar, Tiruvanmiyur, Tambaram, etc.) making neighborhoods like T. Nagar and Mylapore seem "central" rather than "south." However, in Gopalie's estimation, as in that of many from his generation, "South" Madras is still north of the Adyar River.

[38] Gopalie, S. "Metro Amateur Theatre (1965-1985): A Project Report." Senior Fellowship of Cultural Ministry, 2002, p. 14.

Gopalie's research reveals that the majority of these post-Independence plays, unlike the more universally known mythological and historical plays, were "Brahmin-oriented" and represented Brahmin families on the stage.

Tamil Brahmins and "Classical" Good Taste

In his essay on the neighborhood *bhajana* groups in Madras, which mushroomed in Mylapore around the turn of the century, Milton Singer discusses one that was highly organized, in a similar manner to sabhas: "The group elects officers, solicits donations, prints announcements and invitations, and issues an annual report with an audited account of its revenues and expenditures."[39] In addition, this particular group was instrumental in founding an association of Madras *bhajana* groups and devotees. Although Singer argues that these groups were "integrative,"[40] the breakdown of identifiable donors he lists for the 1959 annual festival is 80% Brahmin.[41] Many group leaders told him that they saw their role as "democratizing," but only insofar as they sought the improvement of "non-Brahman speech, attitudes, and behavior that come[s] from association with Brahmans."[42]

Many scholars and critics have noted the correlation between high social status and what is considered to be "good" taste.[43] In India, consumers, and often producers, of these highbrow cultural performances tend to have high social status that is usually

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[39] Singer 1972, p. 214.
[40] Ibid., p. 229. "In this particular context, the multilingual, multicaste, and multisect *bhajana* may be seen as a defensive effort to unify the very groups that the pro-Dravidian movement tends to divide: Tamil and non-Tamil; Brahman and non-Brahman; Saivite, Vaisnavite, and all 'believers' in Hinduism."
[41] Ibid., p. 215.
[42] Ibid., p. 229.
[43] See Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984; Radway, Janice. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997; Gans, Herbert J. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste.* Revised and updated edition. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

accompanied by high caste and class statuses. It therefore makes sense that those who aspire to higher status would alter their entertainment choices and professed tastes to be in closer accord with those arts patronized by recognized elites.

The sabhas are, on one hand, "aimed at people…who wanted desperately to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate."[44] On the other, they are aimed at the actual elite and provide a forum in which "quality" performances can be seen. Sabhas, like book clubs and other cultural organizations, give their members a schedule that they can follow throughout the year to become more cultured, although the sabhas usually state their goal as improving the state of the arts, not their members. The sabha patronage structure allows powerful members of the community to define taste according to their own standards by becoming sabha secretaries and organizers and arranging entertainments for their members in that capacity. Sabhas construct high-brow *Indian* culture through the classical music and dance performances they offer.

The Brahmin community's dedication to the promotion of the arts as part of a nationalist agenda was evident in the founding of the sabhas and the "classical" performances they sponsored, the success of the Bharata Natyam school Kalakshetra,[45] and the community's support of Hindi as a national language. Those who were invited to perform in the sabhas and for All India Radio as classical musicians were also primarily of Brahmin caste.[46] The Tamil music performance community was divided as early as

[44] This is a characteristic of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the U. S. that Janice Radway studied (Radway 1997, p. 5).
[45] Kalakshetra is one of the main classical music and dance training institutions that was started in Madras during the pre-Independence period. It was founded by prominent Brahmin and Theosophist Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936.
[46] In its early years the Madras Music Academy under the direction of E. Krishna Iyer did sponsor performances by well-known devadasis such as Balasaraswati.

the fifteenth century into ritual temple specialists, singer-composers who "were engrossed in the poetics of devotion,"[47] and the professional singers who were attached to the courts. Each had their own musical tradition, and the project of consolidating a "classical" music that Lakshmi Subramanian dates to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries privileged the court singers "who had a grounding in musical grammar and belonged to the upper castes, mostly Brahmins, who combined knowledge of the scriptures, Sanskrit with a reading of conventional musical texts"[48] over the others, particularly over the temple ritual specialists, the devadasis and the Oduvars, who were of low social status. One solution, just as in dance, was to try to attract performers of higher social status. The English daily *Swarajya,* edited by T. Prakasam, for instance,

> urged that the precious art be separated from its evil association, but added that this would be possible only if an increasing number of votaries of the art imparted to it something of the purity of their own lives. It was a call for girls from 'respectable' families to take up the dance.[49]

All India Radio actually barred "singers and musicians from the courtesan culture—anyone 'whose private life was a public scandal.'"[50] The station also discouraged performers from "non-respectable" communities by using an elaborate audition system by which performers were graded not only on performance but also on music theory, something that only the new amateur Brahmin performers, who had academic as well as performance training, were learning to the satisfaction of the station.

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[47] Subramanian, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 9.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Arudra. *E. Krishna Iyer Centenery Issue.* Madras: Music Academy, 1997, p. 8.
[50] Lelyveld, David. "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All-India Radio." In *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World.* Edited by Carol A. Breckenridge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995: 49-65, p. 57. He is quoting from H. R. Luthra, *Indian Broadcasting* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1986), p. 105.

Sabhas have an international reputation for good taste in the Indian performance arts based on the annual music festival their secretaries organize in Chennai every December-January. It is less well known that the sabhas not only promote classical music and dance, but Tamil-language comedy theater as well. This means that the very same sabhas that sponsor the arts considered to be "high" also indulge their members by sponsoring plays which are generally dismissed as "just comedy."

The Madras Music Festival, as it was originally called, was established in the late 1920s to coincide with the annual Congress Party meeting.[51] Chennai is famous for its culture and arts in India, and it is considered a privilege to perform in the city, especially during the December-January "season." Performers come from all over the world because "[c]oncerts in Chennai bolster the credibility of dancers as performers, teachers, and choreographers within their local communities."[52] Music season concerts are the best publicized, attended, and reviewed, so they are greatly coveted. Locals as well as Indian and foreign tourists flood the city at that time of year to see some of the hundreds of concerts, dance performances, and dramas that take place each day.

Classical music and dance performances appeal both to a local audience and to the cultural tourists who come to Chennai for the festival. Sabha dramas are more directly targeted at a local (Tamil-speaking) audience than the classical performances. Visitors to the city may not understand Tamil, and even if they do, many jokes allude to local issues or events with which they may not be familiar. Consequently, there is much more flexibility with scheduling dramas than is the case with the classical arts, whose performances tend to be clustered around the festival. Additionally, many

[51] Weidman 2001, pp. 14-15, 24.
[52] O'Shea, Janet. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007, p. 155.

sabhas such as Karthik Fine Arts, the Mylapore Fine Arts Club, Parthasarathy Swami Sabha, Bharat Kalachar, Brahma Gana Sabha, and the Nataka Academy hold special drama festivals at other times of the year and honor the contributions of theater artists at those times, exonerating them in the eyes of most drama artists from the necessity of including dramas in their festival schedule.

Kausalya Santhanam wrote an article in *The Hindu* a few years ago called "Is Drama Left Out of the Celebration?"[53] It is a series of interviews with "a few leading names of Tamil theatre" to ascertain their views "not only on the status of Tamil theatre during the festival but also its position overall in the perception of the people, the sabha organizers, and State authorities." The responses of the artists to this question are diverse and closely related to the type of theater each one performs and to his (or her) popularity. R. S. Manohar, famous for his historical and mythological dramas complete with elaborate costumes and stage settings, and founder of what was previously one of the most popular troupes in the city,[54] "can't understand why drama does not form part of the festival in a substantial measure."[55] "Crazy" Mohan, an extremely popular "pure comedy" artist, on the other hand, spoke as an apologist for the sabhas' attention to music during the festival season: "Music concerts are held only during the December season while drama is staged throughout the year. Even during the season, quite a few sabhas host plays." He understands Manohar's viewpoint, but says that it is only certain types of plays that are not booked during the

[53] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* December 1, 2003.
[54] Farley P. Richmond writes, "Commercial theatre in Madras is virtually dead, with one exception. Manohar's National Theatre is one of the best-organized and slickest commercial operations that one may find anywhere in urban India" (Richmond, Farley P. "Characteristics of the Modern Theatre." In *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance,* edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, 387-462. Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 393).
[55] Quoted in Santhanam, *The Hindu,* December 1, 2003.

season: "Serious theatre and the classics may not appeal to everyone today in Tamil Nadu….I feel it is in good taste to like humorous plays, it is a healthy trend….So viewers come to the theatre to see something different [from the tragedy and conflict they can see in TV serials] and novel like 'Jurassic Baby' or 'Crazy Ghosts.'"[56] S. Ve. Shekher, whose genre and popularity are similar to Mohan's, agrees with him that "[s]ome sabhas honour drama artists regularly during the festival. In Chennai, the regular sabha is in fact only oriented to the music festival."[57] Artists who perform plays that are more likely to have appeal to visitors from outside of Chennai (N. Muthusamy, Bombay Gnanam) tended to side with Manohar in asserting that the sabhas need to do more to encourage drama during the season.

Another reason that the annual festival has featured mainly music and dance may be the fact that many critics and sabha leaders agree with critic K. N. Subramanyam that the quality of dramas in the city is very poor compared to the quality of music. Sabhas base their reputations on the classical music and dance performances they offer and the festival is their opportunity to share that schedule with the world. Sabha dramas are patronized by the same core elite audience as the classical arts, but are not interesting to the non-Tamil-speaking tourists who attend the festival and are willing to pay for tickets to performances. Ticket sales during this period may sustain the sabha financially for the rest of the year, so they are very important.

Sabhas and Finances

[56] Quoted in Santhanam, *The Hindu,* December 1, 2003. *Jurassic Baby* and *Crazy Ghosts* are two of his plays.
[57] Quoted in Santhanam, *The Hindu,* December 1, 2003.

Most sabha concerts are ticketed, which naturally limits access to those who can pay for either a membership or a ticket, but even the free events are primarily attended by Brahmins who consider themselves to be middle-class. The idea of gate collection (box office) is central to some sabhas, but others have different strategies for remaining financially viable that allow them to take risks when sponsoring performances. If a large enough audience can be guaranteed, even if it is composed entirely of members, it may be possible to procure corporate sponsorship for performances, which removes some of the pressure to sell tickets. This profit then helps them to sustain losses on other, less popular shows. Many sabhas only earn money from ticket sales during the music/dance festival season in December and January and are able to exist for the rest of the year on these earnings and their meager membership fees; there are others that only exist during the festival season. If memberships and sponsorships are not enough to meet the budget requirements, tickets must be sold individually at the door. The Priya Cultural Academy, in fact, no longer has any actual members. They used to have as many as three hundred, but now rely entirely on sponsors and gate collection. Even without members they are usually able to sponsor two shows a month, but that number varies with funds.[58]

In an interview with S. Gopalie, Karthik Rajagopal, former Secretary of the Mylapore Fine Arts Club and founder of Karthik Fine Arts, credited the 1950s shift from the sabha patronage of professional drama troupes with their mythological and historical extravaganzas to the patronage of low-budget amateur comedy plays primarily to finances. He told a story about the professional theater troupe T. K. S. Brothers, which was famous for its mythological and historical plays. The troupe, related Rajagopal, demanded higher and bigger stages from the sabhas in order to accommodate large sets

[58] My interview with the Secretary of the Priya Cultural Academy, May 12, 2004.

and stage properties, then canceled all sabha shows when told this wasn't possible. Rajagopal, as a representative of the sabhas, says that this incident "…opened our eyes. And at this moment Y. G. Parthasarathy with his partner Pattu the playwright, K. Balachander, [V. S.] Raghavan, and others came forward to do plays right in our Sabha premises."[59] For the sabhas, these new artists were "most convenient in financial terms and what the amateurs gave us was absolutely fresh to our audience, that is our members."[60] These amateur troupes keep their overheads low with minimalist requirements for salary, costumes, and staging, and can afford to appeal to only a small cross-section of the population in the city,[61] unlike the elaborate professional performances[62] or expensive ventures such as film and television.

Considering the financial pressures faced by sabhas, it was important for them to promote the shows that could earn them the most money. Jon Higgins, an ethnomusicologist and Karnatic musician, wrote in 1976 that

> [a] threefold increase in the number of sabhas in Madras within the past fifteen to twenty years has heightened the competition to produce performances which will draw the biggest receipts. The effect upon classical music is predictably: concerts are gradually being replaced in sabhas by premiere screenings of new

[59] Gopalie 2002, p. 375.
[60] Ibid., p. 376.
[61] Longtime sabha theater actor and director A. R. Srinivasan estimated that sabha dramas cater to a population of maybe 30,000 middle-class, educated people. He contrasted this to Tamil films, which nearly the entire population of the state, including people of all different strata of society, watch. My interview, May 14, 2004.
[62] I was told in an interview with T. K. S. Pughagherthi that for one of their historical dramas they need to get 10-15,000 rupees in order to make it financially viable. He says that the sabhas offer only 3,000 rupees, so they rarely perform. It is particularly expensive for the T. K. S. Nataka Mantram because they have to hire all of their costumes for each production. The T. K. S. Brothers had owned their own sets and costumes, but after T. K. Shanmugam died, his brothers were sad and quit performing, and disposed of all the sets, costumes, and other properties. R. S. Manohar owns his own sets and costumes, so he can afford to accept less payment from the sabhas. My interview with T. K. S. Pughagherthi, May 8, 2004. S. Ve. Shekher told me that he thinks most troupes are paid between 5000 and 8000 rupees per performance. He and Crazy Mohan are paid more. My interview, July 8, 2003. Krishnamoorthy of Dummies Drama said in an interview with Pushpa Narayan, "At the most, we get Rs. 2,500 per show from the Sabhas. Troupes like S. Ve. Shekar's get Rs. 15,000" (Narayan, Pushpa. "They Have Enacted a Dramatic Success Story in Tamil Theatre." *Indian Express.* May 8, 2004). From what S. Ve. Shekher himself has said, I understand that his troupe makes a minimum flat rate of 25,000 rupees per performance (approximately $580).

> Tamil films and the ubiquitous social drama (the South Indian equivalent of North America's afternoon TV soap-serials). Faced with angry criticism from the minority of music lovers, a sabha secretary simply shrugs his shoulders with the standard disclaimer: "It's what the public wants."[63]

The implication, of course, is that the "ubiquitous social drama(s)" (namely, sabha dramas) that the public "wants" are clearly inferior to the classical music that the public "should" appreciate and support. Sabhas need to maintain their financial viability, and therefore tend to sponsor entertainments that the public "wants" and will pay money for. In 1976, before the advent of the television serial in India, these dramas attracted far more viewers than they do today, and were quite lucrative investments.

In today's Chennai, however, the financial incentive has reversed: it is more financially rewarding for sabhas to support the classical arts than the comedy dramas. Only a very few drama troupes are popular enough to attract the public and earn gate collection for the sabha.[64] The sabhas' expenses are high, especially for those who rent the big air-conditioned halls for the evening,[65] even though they may pay little for the actual performances. Sabhas may "sponsor" music and dance performances, but that does not necessarily mean that they pay money to the artists for their work. Because Chennai performances provide so much cultural capital and the city is such a desirable place for artists to perform, many sabhas have either reduced or eliminated remuneration for artists. There are so many excellent classical performers in the city, especially during the music season when they travel there from all over the world, that it is impossible for the sabhas to attract viewers—and therefore funding—for them all.

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[63] Higgins, Jon B. "From Prince to Populace: Patronage as a Determinant of Change in South Indian (Karnatak) Music" *Asian Music* 7, no. 2 (1976): 20-26, pp. 22-3.
[64] Crazy Creations, Natakapriya, and possibly United Amateur Artists are the only ones, and subsequently they have more opportunities for performances through the sabhas in Chennai than any other troupes.
[65] These can run upwards of 10,000 rupees (approximately $230) for a single evening rental (see Appendix A).

This trend of "insufficient honoraria," in Janet O'Shea's words, has led to what some call "a stagnation" in the Chennai cultural landscape where "'newcomers' don't get a platform to perform—unless they are prepared to turn their pockets inside out and let their money do the talking."[66] The more established sabhas have boxes filled with elaborate applications from dancers and musicians who are willing to pay (or "make a donation") to be placed on their performance schedules. These performers spend incredible amounts of money to print colorful booklets with their biodata, photographs, and previous performances listed and wait for sabhas to get back to them. Cho Ramasamy's comedic play *Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai* (*The Sastras Don't Say So*) includes the character of a sabha secretary who has a great deal of power over the doctor character. He gets all his family's medical treatment for free and requests expensive electronics from the doctor's trip abroad simply because he is promising to someday set a date for the doctor's eight-year-old daughter's *arangetram,* or first solo dance performance, in his sabha.

The result of this trend is that many talented artists in the city never get a chance to perform. In order to compete with the financial advantage of international artists, many Chennai-based artists "supplement intracity concerts with outside ones, frequently turning to the better-paying international venues to support their career in Chennai because of the discrepancy between their payment policies and those of their Chennai counterparts."[67] Without reliable funding, Chennai continually presents the same performers to its audiences, leading to a decline in attendance. The hope that many of the local performers hold is that if the audiences won't pay, perhaps corporate sponsors will.

[66] P. Dhananjayan, quoted in Muthalaly, Shonali. "Fine Arts, But No Future?" *The Hindu*, October 23, 2003.
[67] O'Shea 2007, p. 156.

The trouble with this idea is that if there is no proof of demand and a guaranteed audience, companies won't spend the money to sponsor performances, since the return for their advertising dollars would be very low.[68] So again, the cycle continues and the big name performers can both attract corporate sponsors and sell tickets, but everyone else—in music, dance, and theater—struggles. As Janet O'Shea points out, however, it is hard to blame the sabhas, who depend on donations, memberships, and corporate sponsorship for their very existence and therefore must support the artists who can best attract those necessary funds.[69]

The financial problems clearly affect all the arts promoted by the sabhas. Shonali Muthalaly's October 23, 2003 article "Fine Arts, But No Future?" in *The Hindu* highlighted some of the funding issues for promoters of the arts which apply equally well to sabhas as to the Marga Festival she is discussing. An organization called "Marga" put together a three-day festival for the "unrecognized cultural treasures of dance, theatre, and music" in Chennai, but hardly got anyone to come to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan show. Muthalaly laments that this poor turnout was

> in spite of the fact that the organizers roped in an array of talented performers at a considerable expense, ensured that the show was professionally executed with dramatic lighting, powerful orchestras and lavish costumes and set it all in an air-conditioned, comfortable auditorium located in Chennai's cultural heart, Mylapore.

The reasons for this problem are many and the audience is both partly responsible for and negatively affected by the trend. Most programs organized by sabhas, especially classical music or dance programs during the non-festival season, are not ticketed. The members, of course, have paid their annual fees and can attend, but these events are also open to the

[68] The advertisements are usually present on banners hung beside or below the stage or in the program. See Janet O'Shea 2007, p. 196, fn 15 for the comments of dancers on this practice.
[69] Ibid., p. 156.

general public and do not require those attendees to purchase tickets unless it is a big name performer. The reason for this is that, as Dhananjayan, a famous Bharata Natyam teacher and performer in Chennai, laments, "People are unwilling to buy tickets in Chennai. This is a sad situation existing only here."[70] Someone, however, has to pay for these performances. As Muthalaly points out, it is expensive to rent the halls, hire the orchestras, get costumes, and pay for lights and technicians. In the case of theater, sets also need to be hired. What has happened in the case of the classical arts is that unless the performer has already established a very good reputation and can attract paying audiences, sabhas require the *performer* to sponsor his or her own performance.[71]

Although many amateur classical musicians and dancers are willing to fund their own performances to build resumes, get exposure, or have an outlet for their years of training, this is not often the case for amateur theater troupes, though it is becoming more common. Usually an unknown troupe will fund one performance of a new play themselves to which they will invite the sabha secretaries and the press, hoping to get some good reviews and shows booked for the rest of the year. They are, however, amateurs, and most do not expect to earn money from their drama performances. They are aiming only not to operate at a loss, though many will make up financial shortcomings with money earned at their regular jobs at the bank, railway station, or small business. Krishnamoorthy of Dummies Drama described these difficulties, saying that

> [a]t a time when there is a lack of interest in theatre, we find it necessary to have innovations on stage with lights, sets and projections. Every time we think

[70] Quoted in Muthalaly, *The Hindu*, October 23, 2003.
[71] O'Shea 2007, pp. 195-6, fn 16 relates the reactions of several dancers of "varied levels of renown and seniority" on this trend.

> creativity, we are forced to think of cost. We spend thousands of rupees and find it difficult to break even merely through gate collections.[72]

It is unlikely that sabhas will pay theater practitioners in Chennai more for their performances, so although artists are distressed by the lack of audiences, they don't have any financial motivation to alter their style or humor in order to appeal to broader audiences. Kathadi Ramamurthy told me that his plays generally run a deficit of a few hundred rupees per performance, and he draws many more people to the theater than most troupes, which must operate at an even bigger deficit.

Kathadi is very well-known and respected. He is always invited as a VIP for theater functions and has kind words for everyone in the field. He also actually *attends* other people's plays, which is a rare thing. He and S. Radhakrishnan (Raadhu), who founded the Nataka Academy, are two of the few drama veterans who make this kind of effort, and everyone, especially the newer troupes, really appreciates their patronage. Despite this, Kathadi no longer draws huge crowds for his plays, though his numbers are certainly respectable. [73] He is usually booked in the "mini hall" at the two biggest theaters, the Vani Mahal and the Narada Gana Sabha. In 2004, however, for the anniversary festival of his 50th year in theater and the 40th of his troupe Stage Creations, he was in the main Narada Gana Sabha, which seats 1040, and the revivals of his most famous roles attracted good-sized crowds, filling three quarters of the seats.

One of the major issues faced by sabhas and amateur artists alike over the years has been that of remuneration. How much should each group be paid per play? Should it vary by sabha or troupe or what? There are many factors to be taken into account for

[72] Pushpa Narayan, *The Indian Express*, May 8, 2004.
[73] I estimate that an average performance draws about 100 people of all ages. Tickets range from 50-500 rupees.

these decisions. The sabhas are of different sizes, some with very small memberships,[74] some with large, some with A/C, some with fans and poorly working generators. If there is a large hall to pay for, can they fill it for one show? For two shows? Will they be able to sell any tickets outside their members? Could they partner with another sabha to sponsor the show? How many actors are in the troupe? How elaborate and expensive are their sets and costumes? How many professional female actresses do they need to pay? Can they accept part of their payment in the form of tickets to the performance? All of these factors needed to be considered in order to make the performance, if not a winning, at least not a losing proposition for either troupe or sponsor.

Discrepancies and in-fighting about appropriate remuneration prompted the founding of the Federation of City Sabhas and the Association of City Sabhas.[75] The idea behind these organizations, which soon combined, was to "fix fees and regulate theater."[76] The sabha secretaries would convene after the initial performance of a new play held for this express purpose and after deciding whether or not to add a play to what quickly became known as "the sabha circuit," would fix the fee for a performance of that play. This fee could be difficult for smaller sabhas to pay, and their failure to do so was part of what led to the collapse of the organization. Another major problem was that

[74] These small sabhas will often combine their memberships and funds in order to put on shows.
[75] There is great discrepancy as to when this took place. S. Ve. Shekher, in a July 8, 2003 interview, told me that the Federation of City Sabhas was founded in 1960 and mentioned a Federation of Amateur Drama Troupes that was founded at the same time. I have seen no other mention of this latter organization. K. S. Rajendran writes that the Federation of City Sabhas was founded in 1981 (Rajendran, K. S. "Drama and Society: A Study of Tamil Dramatic Performances (1870-1980)." Thesis presented to the Tamil Nadu Council of Historical Research, March 1989, p. 155). S. Gopalie couldn't pinpoint a date, but because Komal Swaminathan was the power behind it, he believed the Federation of City Sabhas to have been founded in the mid-1970s (my interview, July 16, 2007). At any rate, it was powerful for many years. The Federation still exists in name, but according to Dr. Gopalie, the sabhas and troupes no longer feel any compulsion to follow its recommendations.
[76] Gopalie 2002, p. 38, from an interview with Shri Srinivasan of Kala Niketan.

many actors and troupe leaders (notably Komal Swaminathan) accused the sabhas of being arbitrary and believed that they should be paid more.

Because of their access to resources and performance spaces, the predominantly Brahmin middle-class members of the sabhas have dictated the style and content of the popular Tamil drama over the past fifty years. Farley Richmond writes, "A unique feature of the Madras theatre is the control sponsoring organizations exert over the economic viability of the amateur organizations and the choice of productions."[77] The sabhas' position was that the troupes should be appreciative of any remuneration at all since acceptance onto the circuit provided exposure for their work by guaranteeing the troupe around seventy performances throughout the city for a play.

This type of exposure is no longer available. Gopalie writes that

> [b]etween the years 1965-1985 one can choose from a dozen plays in an evening. But that dwindled from 1980 onwards. The reasons are far too many. The sabhas dwindled from a little over a hundred to a mere dozen.[78]

What this means is that today, a popular troupe with an extensive active repertory, like S. Ve. Shekher or Crazy Mohan, will perform around six to ten plays a month,[79] but the majority of troupes are lucky to get ten sponsored performances over the course of a year. V. Sreevatson, whose Dummies Communications was five years old at the time, with one play inaugurated each year, told me in an interview in 2003 that if they couldn't get ten sponsored shows in a year they would sponsor some themselves in order to reach that number.

Distinction, Motivation, and Audience/Performer Status

[77] Richmond 1990, p. 398.
[78] Gopalie 2002, p. 17. While these numbers are not exactly accurate, they do give a sense of both the general trend and the perception of the decline by the theater artists themselves.
[79] Shekher says this used to be around 30 before TV became widespread in the late 1980s. My interview, July 8, 2003.

One reason that sabhas are willing to operate at a loss for certain performances is that they consider themselves to be doing a service to the art and to the community by sponsoring quality artists. Critics and sabhas are both instruments of the Brahmin community and as such consciously consider part of their agenda to be to raise the level of taste in the city. Many Tamil journals[80] had regular columns of music criticism by the 1930s and 1940s. "It was the responsibility of the music critic—and the goal of Krishna Iyer's book [*Personalities in Present-Day Music* (1933)]—to help ignorant audiences develop their 'taste' in music."[81] Sabhas have been associated with the classical arts from the beginning of the twentieth century, and these arts are firmly at the top of the accepted hierarchy of available entertainments in Chennai, especially Karnatic music. Sabha plays are in rotation with Karnatic music and Bharata Natyam performances for audiences that predominantly consist of members of the organizing sabha, and are therefore much the same.[82]

Pierre Bourdieu's arguments about "distinction" are helpful in considering sabha plays, but do not answer several key questions. It must be understood that the status of a

[80] Including *Ānanta Vikaṭan, Kalki, Bharata Mani,* and *Kaveri* (See Weidman 2006, p. 86).
[81] Weidman 2006, p. 84.
[82] In the audience survey that I conducted in Chennai, only 29.25% of respondents (of whom there were 253 total) said that they currently (71) or formerly (3) belonged to a sabha. I believe that this number is low because I got a very poor rate of response at most performances. The majority of my respondents came from attendees at S. Ve. Shekher plays (117 total, of which only 38 were sabha members) or from Kathadi Ramamurthy's Golden Jubilee, a special event that attracted many non-regular theater-goers (23 of the 82 respondents were sabha members, and 2 were press). S. Ve. Shekher fans are known for being fans of *his,* not necessarily of dramas in general. For this reason, fans will buy individual tickets to his performances when they want to attend (Shekher performs somewhere nearly every week), rather than joining a sabha, which will offer a variety of drama troupes along with other entertainments. Both S. Ve. Shekher and Kathadi Ramamurthy were incredibly supportive of my project and made a point of announcing the survey at their plays and requesting fans to respond. Shekher also invited me up on stage on occasion to do the same. This was much more effective than simply passing them out at the entrance and collecting them at the end, with only the tacit approval of the troupe. I did net 31 responses from the Kartik Fine Arts Annual Drama Festival, but again this was a special event that attracts many non-sabha members (only two of these respondents were sabha members). The responses from Crazy Creations and UAA performances were much more even, with 11 sabha members and 13 non-sabha members responding.

performance art and the status of the class of the patrons of an art are reciprocal. The status of an art is raised by attracting high-class patrons *and* a person can raise his status by preferring art that is accepted as "high-brow." In Bourdieu's view,

> [n]othing more clearly affirms one's 'class,' nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music. This is of course because, by virtue of the rarity of the conditions for acquiring the corresponding dispositions, there is no more 'classifactory' practice than concert-going or playing a 'noble' instrument…[83]

Bourdieu sees music as the most "pure" of all the arts[84] because it is the most personal and internalized. A person can learn to appreciate different kinds of music, but there will still be some that touch him more than others, and this personal preference, as a function of many internalized characteristics, is difficult to change. Bourdieu has divided musical genres into three "zones of taste" which he finds "roughly correspond to educational levels and social classes.[85] The zone that is the most "classifying," as he puts it, is "legitimate" taste (as opposed to "middle-brow" and "popular") because preference for works in this category is highest "in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital."[86] Karnatic music, as a "legitimate" art, is very scientific and exact, and therefore best appreciated by connoisseurs (listeners educated in its system).

These connoisseurs of the classical arts, as founders and members of individualized sabhas, are very aware of themselves as a "group" that is in contrast to other such groups (sabhas). They choose very deliberately which sabha to be part of and this self-selection of the audience is accompanied by a projection of their identity as a group. Y. Gee Mahendran, who currently leads the United Amateur Artists drama troupe

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[83] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, p. 18.
[84] Ibid., p. 19.
[85] Ibid., pp. 13-18.
[86] Ibid., p. 16.

as well as acting in several popular television serials,[87] once quipped that "other sabhas have 200 cars outside and 200 people inside but Parthasarathy Swami Sabha has 20 cars outside and 2000 people inside and each one is an active critic."[88] The stereotype of the rich music connoisseur is pervasive, but obviously doesn't apply to all music lovers.

Two of the stereotypical characteristics of sabha audiences are silence and discipline. In 1944 P. Sambamoorthy wrote an essay titled "Our Concert Programme: Some Underlying Principles," which advised performers and audience members about proper behavior at a concert. He said that "members of the audience should particularly take care that they do not talk with each other or become restless, when the tambura or some other instrument is being tuned. Nor should a member of an audience make an entry or exit during the middle of an item."[89] Amanda Weidman has also drawn attention to a 1940 *Ānanta Vikaṭan* cartoon that illustrated the discipline expected of classical music audiences, saying that they should not come late, cough or sneeze, talk noisily, or bring crying children.[90] As Weidman's analysis of an advertisement for a water pump that promises "music hall silence" demonstrates, the space of the concert hall was ideally an awe-inspiring place, set apart from other spaces. The over-explanations, however, indicate that the silence and discipline of audiences were a far-from-realized ideal.[91] The connoisseurs of Karnatic music distinguish themselves from listeners of "vulgar" folk or film music in the same way that Bourdieu's sample of Parisians who prefer the *Well-Tempered Clavier* do. So with regard to music, Bourdieu's classifications and ideas,

[87] Including *Sahana* and *Rudra Veenai.*
[88] Iyengar 2003.
[89] Quoted in Weidman 2006, p. 83.
[90] Weidman 2006, p. 88.
[91] See Ibid., pp. 86-90.

from the context of twentieth century Paris, are applicable in today's class-conscious Chennai.

The picture, however, is much more complicated with regards to theater. Since sabhas are usually joined on the basis of their music selection, the plays have little effect on the perceived cultural status of the viewers. The dramas, which are not considered classical or high-brow, are offered for different reasons. Because there is no cultural capital attached to attendance the way there is with the classical performances, drama audiences are more likely to be genuinely interested in the performance and have less complicated motives for attending that do not include bettering themselves or being publicly recognized as "cultured." The Karnatic music sabha audiences may not meet the ideal of silence, but the sabha drama audiences most certainly are even further from that model.[92] K. S. Rajendran wrote that Kalki, in his weekly column "Drama Āṭal Pāṭal" ("Drama, Dance, Song") in *Ān̲anta Vikaṭan̲,* which contained performance accounts of Tamil popular dramas from the early 1920s, described in great detail "[t]he noisy auditorium full of women with children, drunkards and lumpen elements of those days."[93] I attended around 125 performances over the course of my year of fieldwork, and while I did not notice any drunkards, I found a new annoyance in the ubiquitous mobile phone. I kept count of the cell phones that rang at each performance and found it to be an average of ten or twelve, but several times I heard more than twenty over the

[92] It is the cinema audiences that are notorious for being loud and disrespectful of other viewers. There has been much written about this since the beginning of cinema in India, right up to Chitra Danger's 2003 article "Mind Your Movie Manners," which started with the header "Cell phones, chips and chatter make cinema viewing an unpleasant experience. A few tips on movie etiquette" (Danger, *The Hindu,* October 21, 2003).

[93] Cited in Rajendran 1989, p. 85. At a March 14, 2004 performance of S. Ve. Shekher's *Alwaa* at the Kalaivanar Arangam, there was a particularly riotous crowd with many young men in attendance. Shekher scolded them from the stage, telling them to go to the beach if they wanted to be rowdy. He then reminded them that he was being paid to perform and they had bought tickets, so they should listen to him.

course of a two-hour play. Several times I heard people answer their phones and carry on conversations at a volume that drowned out the actors on stage. S. Ve. Shekher, improviser that he is, made a joke on stage that called out the offender; Y. Gee. Mahendran actually stopped his play and reprimanded an offender from the stage. Crazy Mohan mentioned the constantly ringing cell phones to me before a show of his in Houston in November of 2004, expressing his distaste for the disrespectful Chennai audience members as opposed to the polite, attentive American ones who "concentrate and enjoy the jokes." Never once, however, did I hear a pre-performance announcement to turn them off, though that was standard at all the non-sabha plays I attended in Chennai.[94]

The audiences may not be trying to improve themselves, or doing it consciously, but many will watch the plays with some of the same connoisseurship that they bring to the classical arts, evaluating them on the bases of creativity, execution of jokes, and quality of acting and production, among other criteria. While there are new plays every year, many of those presented on Chennai's stages are favorites from previous years. I found that audiences often know the dialogue by heart either from seeing a play performed many times, seeing the televised version, or listening to the audiocassette recording of the dialogue. With the exception of new plays, nearly everyone at least knows the story in advance of viewing the play in the theater. This makes it difficult for first-time viewers to follow the jokes, because audience members anticipate them and laugh *before* they are told, effectively drowning out the punch lines. The audiocassettes are very popular and relatively cheap (about half the price of a theater ticket). Repetition

[94] In fact, when I attended a performance at The Other Festival, the announcement was made no less than four times before the start of the first performance.

is a distinguishing feature of these plays. Part of the appeal of the cassettes and, in turn, of the live performances, is that one picks up new things with each hearing. When I interviewed people in the theater, the vast majority had previously listened to the cassettes of the plays we were attending. The entire audience was anticipating the jokes and laughing well before they were even cracked. Actually going to the theater, however, is a practice that varies with the audience member.

They notice differences in performances and S. Ve. Shekher, who improvises more than any other stage drama comedian, generally gets good responses to his improvisations and asides. These are what make each performance a special, unique experience, and the audiences notice and appreciate the effort and expertise.

Although the sabha drama audiences take their viewing practices more seriously than folk drama audiences, who are likely to talk during the performance and wander in and out at will, tend to do, the sabha dramas, unlike classical music and dance, are not assumed to be valuable ways to spend one's time. There is, as we saw in previous chapters, some debate within the community concerning the plays, one side of which suggests that they are actually detrimental to both the art of drama and the psyches of the audience members. The merit of individual performers of classical music and dance may be debated, but never the status or inherent value of the genre itself. Bourdieu himself contrasted music, whose consumption he saw as an individual predilection, to theater, which has a social message and only works when it has "an immediate and profound affinity with the values and expectations of its audience. The theater divides the public and divides itself."[95] So although the sabha audience may define itself as high class based on its musical choices, its theatrical choices contribute to the sabha's identity in a

[95] Bourdieu 1984, p. 19.

different way. Rather than being based on tradition and the way things have always been done,[96] the theater it presents is dependent upon the desires of the current audience (that is, membership). The plays have revealed continuities and changes in the themes and jokes that have been considered funny by that community in different time periods. I argue that it is the *theatrical* selections and the discourses surrounding them, not the musical ones, that reveal the most about the sabhas' ideas of good taste.

It is very difficult to talk about something as nebulous as taste and the reasons why certain types of music or performance or visual art appeal to different people. There are so many factors that go into determining an individual's taste, including his upbringing, his education, his age, and his economic status, that it is difficult to pinpoint any one thing as an explanation of entertainment tastes. The sabhas are a particularly fruitful place to study the combination of entertainments that constitute "legitimate" good taste (in Bourdieu's sense) in Chennai because the community that belongs to these organizations is in actuality quite homogenous in many of these ways.

I argue that identity is best visible not in tradition, as most Brahmins would argue, because these cultural performances show an ideal that is supposed to be frozen in time. I look instead to something much more fluid and spontaneous: humor. Susan Seizer has moved in a valuable direction with her work on village comedy, successfully convincing her readers "that humor is a good site for the study of culture."[97] I take this one step further and argue that more than being a *good* site for studying culture, humor is one of

[96] This is not to say that there has been no innovation in the realm of classical Karnatak music over the years. See Weidman 2006 and Subramanian 2006 for examples.
[97] Seizer, Susan. Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 21.

the best. It offers insights into identity construction, but it does not usually confer status on the observer.

Because high social status is one of the key components of Tamil Brahmin identity, attending comedy plays is not an act of distinction in the way that attending Karnatic music concerts are. Participating as a performer or audience member in classical performances allows individuals to partake of the symbolic cultural power associated with them. This reputation for good taste and social status that they thus enjoy may or may not represent their actual taste or financial situation. The more generations back a practice can be traced, the more "authentic" it is believed to be and the more status it confers, and this is true of the performance arts as well. This is one reason that so many people who were involved in the rather recent revivals of classical Indian performance traditions invested a great deal of time and energy into linking those traditions to ancient texts.[98] Many scholars (c.f. Singer 1972; Chatterjee, 1993; Geetha and Rajadurai 1998; and Joshi 2001) have written about the conflict that this privileging of tradition has caused for Indians who are trying to be "modern" while at the same time retaining their high status by being "traditional." Sanjay Joshi has helpfully described the use of traditional hierarchies and religious beliefs in the construction of a modern Indian middle-class identity as a "fractured modernity," which captures the contradiction inherent in what he argues is a coherent project of self-empowerment.[99]

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[98] There are many examples of this phenomenon, but to cite just a few, see Allen, Matthew Harp. "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance." *The Drama Review* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 63-100 on Bharata Natyam; Krishnamurti, Yamini. *A Passion for Dance: My Autobiography.* With Renuka Khandekar. New Delhi: Viking Press, 1995 on Kuchipudi; and Lakshmi Subramanian 2006 on Karnatic music.

[99] Joshi, Sanjay. Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

The value placed on traditionalism has in the Indian case often been envisioned as a need to protect Indian culture from sexually suggestive scenes, lyrics, and dialogues. Monika Mehta's evaluation of letters written in protest of the song "Choli ke peeche kya hai" ("What is Behind the Blouse?") in the 1993 Hindi film *Khalnayak* argues that "Indian culture" is part of a "vulnerable trio" (along with women and children) that needs this protection. The letters cited by Mehta in reference to the *Khalnayak* debate are written by both men and women, but the connecting thread is their concern about the corruption of culture. Within India, one of the concerns of these debates about culture, which Mehta highlights, is "whether national prudishness in any way affected the state's (and a portion of the public's) much desired goal—to be modern and democratic."[100] Mehta is dealing with mass media in her writing, and the mechanisms by which the state can or cannot control the content and imagery of audiocassettes, films, and television are very different from the limited distribution and rigorous self-censorship found in theater productions in Chennai, which has the well-deserved reputation of being the most conservative of the major Indian cities. In her discussion of state censorship, Mehta helpfully points out that there are three separate players participating in censorship debates—the state, the film industry, and the citizenry—each of whom has a different agenda and interest at stake. The debates are, she suggests, not purely academic but actually productive of discourse, sexuality, and the final version of the film in question.

Brahmins in Tamilnadu have been extraordinarily successful at balancing these two seemingly contradictory positions and have the reputation "of being very modern and adaptable because they have acquired modern education and have gone into the

[100] Mehta, Monika. "What is Behind Film Censorship? The *Khalnayak* Debates." *Jouvert* 5, no.3 (2001): 1-9. Viewed on 1/11/02 at http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v513/mehta.htm, p. 1.

professions, business, and industry, although they are also regarded as representatives of Sanskritic Hinduism and the Great Tradition."[101] They have managed to reconcile these conflicting identities and to control others' perceptions of them through a variety of strategies, including their self-representation in sabha dramas. These plays may reflect culture and/or stereotypes of it but they don't deliberately set out to *create* culture in the way that "classical" performances do. The plays reveal much about the concerns of the conservative middle-class community and prompted S. Shankar to write in his introduction to his translation of Komal Swaminathan's *Water! Water!* that

> [m]embers of the sabhas are predominantly urban and middle class, and are notorious for their narrow, conservative tastes and encouraged a conformity and superficiality that degraded both the form and the content of the play.[102]

The discussion about culture in Chennai circles is not just generically "Indian" but more specifically "Tamil," with marriage, morality, and language perceived to be central components of Tamil culture.

Middle-class families in Chennai, for the most part, are exemplars of Monika Mehta's "national prudishness" and like to pretend that sex doesn't exist[103] and that children are immaculately conceived. This tendency is exploited by a very well-received joke in S. Ve. Shekher's 1993 play *Cinna Māpḷē, Periya Māpḷē* ("Younger Son-in-Law, Elder Son-in-Law") about the elder son-in-law Dog Narasimhan falling asleep on the first night of his marriage instead of consummating the marriage, then ten years into his unconsummated marriage expecting children to simply materialize at

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[101] Singer 1972, p. 395.
[102] Shankar, S. "Introduction" to *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan, viii-xxxi. Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2001, p. xiv.
[103] This tendency is also demonstrated in a joke in Cho Ramasamy's *Mohammad bin Tughlaq*, wherein the son is caught sneaking off with his father's books "Sex Before Marriage," "Sex After Marriage," "Boy After Girl," and "Girl After Boy," which are then confiscated by the grandfather as inappropriate for these younger generations, though it is clear that he is sneaking off to read them himself.

any second. First night is an obvious opportunity for artists to talk around sex without ever mentioning or alluding to it directly; mere mention of the first-night rituals is enough for adult audiences to understand the references.

This issue of purity and prudishness evident in these discussions about the propriety of the arts was perhaps most explicitly visible in the reforms of Bharata Natyam carried out by Rukmini Devi and others in pre-Independence Madras. Rukmini Devi herself started the trend of Brahmin women, who were seen as inherently pure and modest, performing on stage. This had hitherto been the domain of lower-caste women whose reputations as prostitutes had tarnished the dance in the eyes of respectable society leaders, leading to a ban of their performances in 1947. Rukmini Devi's performance at first scandalized the Brahmin community,[104] but Brahmins soon began sending their daughters to her dance school, Kalakshetra, which was founded in 1936.

The plays of the 1960s to the 1980s, when sabha comedies were at the peak of their popularity, tended to be family or social comedies with characters that were stereotypically from the target Tamil Brahmin community. It is significant that it was during this same time that the Dravidian (non-Brahmin) parties won power from the Brahmin-dominated Congress and spread anti-Brahmin messages, agitated against Hindi and Sanskrit and gained significant increases in reservations for intermediate and lower castes in colleges and government jobs.[105] The sabha plays, like the Tamil Brahmin

[104] She tells a story to that effect on the video *Kalakshetra: Devotion to Dance*, 1985.
[105] This number has now reached 69% as per the 76th Amendment Act of 1994: "The policy of reservation of seats in Educational Institutions and reservation of appointments of posts in public services for Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes has had a long history in Tamil Nadu dating back to the year 1921. The extent of reservation has been increased by the State Government from time to time, consistent with the needs of the majority of the people and it has now reached the level of 69 per cent. (18 per cent. Scheduled Castes, 1 per cent. Scheduled Tribes and 50 per cent. Other Backward Classes)" (http://www.constitution.org/cons/india/tamnd76.htm).

Association (TAMBRAAS), reacted against these developments and were specifically targeted at an urban, Brahmin, middle-class Chennai audience.

This is one place that the caste difference in audiences made a difference to which plays were performed for which sabhas. The educated Brahmin audiences of Mylapore enjoyed watching themselves on stage in plays that were complete with Brahmin dialect speech and jokes that turned on knowledge of English or Hindi, but the non-Brahmin Georgetown audiences preferred plays with film stars (though this is true in general), historicals, and mythologicals.

Shri Srinivasan of Kala Niketan, a North Madras sabha, discussed with S. Gopalie his hesitation to book the plays of Y. G. Parthasarathy or Cho Ramasamy because of the excessive use of English in their plays. This is an indirect reference to the Brahmin orientation of the plays, since members of that community are usually the most highly educated in English-medium private schools. Srinivasan says that "it is all right with the Mylapore, T. Nagar, Triplicane audiences. But North Madras audiences believed in pure, unadulterated Tamil."[106] One of the members of Viveka Fine Arts told me that the reason they originally had difficulty getting opportunities to perform in north Madras was that they didn't have any lady artistes. They were successful in the more conservative south Madras sabhas, however,[107] and eventually Cho's plays became popular with audiences all over the city and earned very good money for all the sabhas.

[106] Gopalie 2002, p. 37. These audiences were more likely to be non-Brahmin, and it is not surprising that they would prefer "pure Tamil." The Pure Tamil Movement was linked to the Dravidian Movement and is dated by most scholars to 1916. It promoted a decline in the use of foreign words, particularly those of Sanskrit origin (see Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
[107] My interview with R. Neelakanthan, October 29, 2003.

The Mylapore sabhas were assured that their members would attend all sorts of plays and most plays are now inaugurated by Karthik Fine Arts for that reason. The north Madras sabhas are much more cautious and will usually wait to book a play until it has been proven to be a success in south Madras. Kala Niketan's Srinivasan says,

> [w]e never sponsored any Tamil amateur play on our own. Our principle was different. Let the amateur inaugurate and do [the] first few shows anywhere. We will watch and discuss. If the amateur's play is acceptable to us, we invite the group and we fix the fee.
>
> If it is a group with a film star, we give what the other sabhas offer. Here again the remuneration may vary. We believe in gate collection, and if it is not good we do not encourage such groups.[108]

This attitude was severely criticized by many, including playwright Venkat, who blames it for the plight of Tamil theater today, saying that "businessmen Sabha secretaries"

> booked popular plays of Crazy Mohan, S. Ve. Shekher, Cho, why even R. S. Manohar, and made money. They never bothered to encourage up and coming, struggling playwrights….If there had been organizations to put up only plays, theatre would have taken roots. But only Sabha secretaries grew up, made money, bought cars and homes. Theatre never grew. It is my feeling that the sabha secretaries earned more than Cho and Manohar.[109]

This image of the self-serving sabha secretary out to earn money through performances is contrary to the principles of most sabhas, who claim that any money earned through gate collection should ideally be reinvested in the organization by the secretaries or donated to a worthy cause. Sabha secretaries are usually elected by the general membership for fixed-term appointments, and can gain the popularity necessary for re-election by using profits to procure better performances for the

[108] Gopalie 2002, p. 37.
[109] Gopalie interview with Venkat, p. 260. Venkat clearly thinks that Cho and Manohar made more money from their plays than any other artists.

following season or to do charity work, a heavily publicized objective of many sabhas.[110]

The number of sabhas that sponsor Tamil language dramas has drastically declined in number since the 1980s. All of the theater personalities I interviewed had noticed that there are far fewer sabhas now than in the past, and much discussion and debate in the field revolves around the reason for this drastic decline. I studied *The Hindu* events listings from 1992 and found eighty-four sabhas that regularly sponsored dramas,[111] two troupes that sponsored their own dramas,[112] nine organizations that sponsored a drama as a one-time special event,[113] and several other groups that sponsored non-Tamil language dramas (English, Gujarati, Malayalam, and Sanskrit).[114] In 2004, however, there were only forty-two sabhas (fully *half* of what there was in 1992) regularly sponsoring Tamil dramas[115] and two special events open to the public,[116] but nine troupes now sponsored their own plays on occasion[117] and the number of English

[110] Mary Elizabeth Hancock found that social service, defined as "charitable activities for which the performer was not paid" (Hancock 1990, p. 56) is an important component of Tamil Brahmin identity. Nearly all of her Smarta Brahmin informants maintained ties with organizations that identified "social service" as a primary agenda. Many of the theater actors also promote themselves by referring to their charity work. S. Ve. Shekher, for example, has a sidebar on his website labeled "charity" which leads to a page describing all the contributions he has made to various charities, complete with a photo of himself giving blood (http://www.sveshekher.com/main.html viewed on December 2, 2005). Souvenirs and annual reports from every sabha and theater troupe that I have seen include enumerations of contributions to social service.

[111] See Appendix B for a complete list.

[112] Mayan Theaters and Poornam New Theater.

[113] Balajee Construction Employees Welfare Association, Inter-Bank Drama Competition, Tamilnadu Kattai Koothu Kalai Valaroli Munnetra Sangam, Nandanam Ladies Association, Low Cost Health Care, L & T Recreation Club, TWAD Accounts Officers Association, Srinivasa Ladies Club, and the Federation of Sabhas.

[114] These include the Malayalee Club, Ethiraj College Repertory Theatre, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, Pravin Joshi Theatre, the Alliance Francaise, Victoria Vidyalaya English School, Max Mueller Bhavan, and the Samskrita Ranga.

[115] See Appendix C for a complete list.

[116] Alpha to Omega Learning Center and the Lions Club of Padi Shenoy Nagar.

[117] Dummies Drama, Gurukulam, Magic Lantern, Viveka Fine Arts Club, Natakapriya, Crazy Creations, Pareeksha Tamil Theatre Group, Hari Giri Theatres, and Raadhu.

language dramas in Chennai had significantly increased.[118] Businesses, schools, and temples also organize one-time performances for employees, students, or the public on special occasions and these shows may take place in more remote areas of the city.

S.Ve. Shekher told me that back when there were 170 sabhas it was hard for new groups to break in. His strategy was to skip the sabhas and go straight to the public through the press and then use popular demand to get onto the sabha circuit.[119] This seems counterintuitive, that it would be difficult for that many sabhas to fill their schedules with quality performances, which is exactly the argument that K. N. Subramanyam used to explain why sabhas began sponsoring dramas in the first place in the 1930s. In an article he wrote for the *Sangeet Natak Akademi Journal* in 1967, Subramanyam said that "by the end of the thirties, the *sabhas,* being unable to command a regular supply of good music, began to patronize plays and theatre troupes, both amateur and professional." [120] He then went on to say that

> [i]n nearly 25 years, the *sabha* approach to entertainment of an evening has entrenched itself in the consciousness of the middle-class audience, which, while it was familiar with good music, was not familiar with good drama. It mistook any entertainment on the stage as worthwhile and often compared even a tolerably good drama with a bad film and began to find it wanting. So that under the patronage of the *sabhas,* the film stars were vicariously called on to act in plays and those who acted in plays to large audiences, hoped for cinema chances sooner or later. Bad art flourished and is flourishing under and [in the] guise of the popular.

[118] Madras Players is now more active and new groups like Evam, the Center for Contemporary Culture, and the K. R. Rajaravivarma Alliance have sprung up. In addition are the old standbys such as the Alliance Francaise and the Max Mueller Bhavan as well as many college performances.
[119] My interview, May 12, 2004.
[120] Subramanyam, K. N. "Traditional Tamil Drama and the Present Impasse." *Sangeet Natak Akademi Journal* 4, (March-April 1967): 27-36, p. 34.

The dramas, unlike the classical performances, rarely attracted any academic attention or critical acclaim, only this type of criticism. For this reason, many sabhas were hesitant about adding dramas to their performance schedules.

The Hamsadhvani Sabha that operates out of Adyar which, like neighboring Besant Nagar, is an area of the city with a high percentage of Brahmin residents, holds performances on the outdoor stage of the Youth Hostel and continued with only classical music for thirty years. It is unusual because just recently, in 2003, the organization, on the request of its members, chose to include the occasional play in their annual schedule. Instead of sponsoring plays on that year's sabha circuit, however, Hamsadhvani chose to sponsor single performances and revive several classics from the 1960s such as Cavi's *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* and Raadhu's *Kalyāṇattil Kalāṭṭā*, neither of which had been done for quite a while. They fixed the remuneration separately with the troupes for these one-time performances of old favorites that would be certain to draw crowds. These individual negotiations can be much simpler than those discussed earlier which take place with new plays.

The decline in the number of sabha plays performed in Chennai is usually attributed to television, which was becoming accessible and popular at the time the decline started (the *Ramayana* serial, for example, aired in 1987), and has also been linked to a financial recession in the Bombay film industry in the 1980s.[121] Many sabhas, in fact, had to change their drama schedules to accommodate television's film schedule. Once films were showing on Saturdays and Sundays, many dramas moved to the Friday evening time slot, good writers and actors moved to the television and

[121] See Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

film industries, and many former audience members found that they preferred to stay home and watch their favorite drama personalities on TV. This was especially true as transportation in the city became more and more expensive, and the city became less safe, congested, and more polluted. There was also a population shift from the center of the city to more remote (sabha-less) neighborhoods in the Chennai of the late 1980s along with a marked gain in the popularity of classical dance. [122] This could be related to a renewed consciousness of what constitutes good taste. It would make sense that this surge correlated directly with a loss of patronage for the theater, which shares producers and audience with the classical arts through the sabha system.

Given all of this debate and evidence, I was surprised to learn that the actual number of sabhas is not decreasing at all. In fact, many scholars have found the exact opposite. Amanda Weidman, for example, wrote in 2006 that "the number of sabhas in Madras has increased astronomically, particularly in the last thirty years."[123] As a scholar of Karnatic music, Weidman tells a story of astounding success. The India Fine Arts Association, she reports, has quadrupled the number of performances they sponsor over the last thirty years and this is a common trend. She finds that the sabhas are earning money, sponsoring more performances, and multiplying in number. The discrepancy between my numbers and Weidman's can be reconciled in part by the idea that it is only the sabhas that sponsor Tamil-language plays that are declining. Several of the sabhas from the 1992 list are in fact still active but have changed their focus to

[122] "In some cases the increasing popularity of the dance [Bharata Natyam] had meant that children from hereditary dance families had become more involved in teaching or accompanying Bharata Natyam, at times abandoning secure jobs to pursue a full-time artistic career. This transformation occurred in the late 1980s." Gaston, Anne-Marie. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre.* New Delhi: Manohar, 1996, pp. 24-5.

[123] Weidman 2006, p. 80. She cites the magazine *Sruti*, 2003, a special issue on the Madras music season, as noting that there were seventy-three organizations sponsoring concerts during the 2002-2003 season, up from seventeen in 1987-1988.

exclude dramas.[124] Augusto, a playwright in Chennai, helps to explain the discrepancy further between my findings and those of Weidman: "During the festival season, sabhas mushroom just as shops spring up everywhere during a Thiruvizha[125] and then disappear. The sabhas tie up with sponsors and wherever there is space for the parking of cars, concerts are held."[126] These seasonal sabhas may be growing in number and promoting classical music, but they are not regular players on the cultural scene of Chennai and almost never sponsor dramas.

Conclusion

Brahmins in Chennai, because they dominate the press, the universities, and the sabhas, are truly the taste-makers of the city and both construct and embody Tamil notions of good taste. The sabha is a place where people go to enhance their social status by being seen at and discussing the merits of various classical performances. Members of the sabhas are patrons of the arts and dedicated to social service, two activities that underline their value to society and support of "Tamil culture." Other central components of that culture include marriage, morality, and language. I argue that identity is best visible not in tradition, as most Brahmins would argue, because these cultural performances show an ideal that is supposed to be frozen in time. I look instead to something much more fluid and spontaneous: humor.

Tamil language comedy plays may not have the same status as Karnatic music or Bharata Natyam, but they are central to insider understanding of Tamil Brahmin culture. The plays do not attempt to *create* identity or culture, but to reflect them.The sabha plays

[124] For example, Esther Fine Arts currently sponsors programs of film music and dance but no longer sponsors dramas.
[125] A religious festival.
[126] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Is Drama Left Out of the Celebration?" *The Hindu.* December 1, 2003.

may not be known for their cultural capital, but their association with the classical music and dance traditions through the sabhas' patronage opens a space in which they can take advantage of the reputation of recognized elite arts. They use the sabhas' reputation for good taste and excellent Indian performance arts to promote Tamil-language comedy theater in addition to classical music and dance. Sahba plays reflect Tamil Brahmin culture and/or stereotypes of it, revealing much about the concerns of the conservative middle-class community which represents itself through the plays.

This chapter has, I hope, demonstrated that only by looking at the comedy of the sabha plays in detail can an accurate picture of a Tamil Brahmin identity be painted. These plays are viewed and discussed in the public forums of theaters and the press, as opposed to domestic practices which take place within the closed domain of the family. This means that the debate about them and the families that they portray is open and can influence what is seen on stage. One reason why jokes can be funny in one socio-political context but not in another has to do with changes in public opinion. This has led to revision of plays in order to keep them contemporary as well as to several significant shifts in style and content. Response to these jokes can also circumvent the official Tamil Brahmin position on good taste because laughter is spontaneous. There is no time to script a response or to formulate a position as an audience member prone to spontaneous laughter. This allows us as observers a more intimate look at taste than can be gained from the standard position on the most "legitimate" of the arts and their slavish adherence to "tradition."

Shifts in the notion of good taste are visible in the corresponding shifts in the content and style of the plays performed in sabhas. Sabhas control the style and content

of the plays because they are the only sustained outlet for Tamil-language drama in the city. Without their support, most troupes could not continue to perform. At the peak of popularity for sabha dramas, acceptance onto the sabha performance circuit guaranteed troupes around seventy performances throughout the city for a single play. The circuit still keeps plays in circulation both during the inaugural season and also in the years that follow.

Milton Singer and Mary Elizabeth Hancock studied the "everyday invention of culture"[127] among the Tamil Brahmin elite in Chennai; I focus on the identity construction of this particular community as constituted by their representation of themselves on stage. The dramas are an example of what Victor Turner has called "performative reflexivity," when a sociocultural group or its members "turn, bend or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public 'selves.'"[128] The families depicted on the sabha stage occasionally allege to be representations of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, but often include exaggerated examples of various stereotypes. The plays directly confront public perceptions of Brahmins and in so doing simultaneously challenge and reinforce the public face of the middle-class Tamil Brahmin community. The plays are almost always designed to be humorous, a feature which allows writers and comedians to go a step beyond (in both directions) the socially acceptable. This strategy of self-representation is one way that Tamil Brahmins have managed to reconcile their

[127] Hancock 1999, p. 9.
[128] Quoted in Schein, Louisa. "Performing Modernity" in *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (1999): 361-395, p. 368.

conflicting identities of both traditional and modern and to control others' perceptions of them.

The sabhas are a particularly fruitful place to study the combination of entertainments that constitute "legitimate" good taste (in Bourdieu's sense) in Chennai because the community that belongs to these organizations is in actuality quite homogenous. I argue that it is the *theatrical* selections and the discourses surrounding them, not the musical ones, that reveal the most about the sabhas' ideas of good taste. The audiences may not be trying to improve themselves, or doing it consciously, but many will watch the plays with some of the same connoisseurship that they bring to the classical arts, evaluating them on the bases of creativity, execution of jokes, and quality of acting and production, among other criteria. While there are new plays every year, many of those presented on Chennai's stages are favorites from previous years.

In later chapters I will discuss some of the specific values and perceptions that have been popular in the plays over the years and why they have gone in and out of vogue at particular points in history. One of the major questions that arises from this discussion is what the purpose of this type of theater is. If it is not widely appealing and doesn't earn money, why do people continue to sponsor and participate in it? I argue that the benefit perceived by participants is that the theater is a way to perpetuate, define, and create a notion of "culture." And this notion is equivalent to the dominant community's ideas of good taste, even though the plays themselves may not be.

In the following chapter I take a look at where the Tamil Brahmin community fits into the social and political scene in Chennai in order to think about how its position has affected the sabha theater. The community is in the peculiar position of being

"dominant" in a cultural sense and a minority in a numerical one. This disjuncture and the political ideologies of the majority non-Brahmin community have led to both an anxiety and pride in distinguishing themselves culturally that are visible in the plays performed on sabha stages.

Chapter Three

CASTE POLITICS IN MADRAS AND THE RISE OF SABHA COMEDIES

Tamilnadu, as mentioned earlier, was home to a powerful anti-Brahmin movement, and that history has had a significant effect on the art produced in the region, particularly on the sabha theater, which is generally considered to be a Brahmin genre. It is important, therefore, to look in depth at the history of this movement in order to determine the ways in which it has influenced the sabha theater. I argue that the theatrical genre of sabha comedy plays not only developed partially as a response to anti-Brahmin sentiments but also functioned as an apology for the Brahmin community and a celebration of its culture. The Brahmin community responded in a variety of ways to the stereotypes of piety, prejudice, hypocrisy, and narrow-mindedness that "not only missionaries, but British civilians and even a few amongst Hindus"[1] espoused, and the dramas are one of them. The fact that the plays were comedies and not taken seriously in the press as either an art or as propaganda opened a space for Brahmins to laugh at themselves and confront stereotypes indirectly, as jokes. The plays, in their language, content, production, and consumption, were anchored by a preconception of Brahmin superiority that precluded the need for direct political confrontation without sacrificing the community's belief in its own self-importance.

Robert Hardgrave has located the first string of non-Brahmin social projects and organizations in 1873,[2] shortly after Robert Caldwell's 1856 *Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages.* The goal of these organizations

[1] Geetha and Rajadurai mention Grant-Duff, the Governor of Madras, and Swami Vivekananda in particular (p. 8). (Geetha, V. and S. V. Rajadurai. *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar.* Calcutta: Samya, 1998.)

[2] Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr. *The Dravidian Movement.* Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1965, p. 12.

was to work with the colonial government to neutralize internal power differences and advance the non-Brahmin community through education, which would hopefully lead to desirable government jobs. In its early stages, the movement was dominated by wealthy elites from powerful communities such as the Vellala, Chetti, and Mudaliar.[3] "Urbanization and Brahmin dominance," as Marguerite Ross Barnett has argued, "were interrelated features of nineteenth-century social change resulting in the dichotomization of socio-economic elites into non-Brahmin and Brahmin segments."[4] Non-Brahmin elites challenged Brahmin preponderance in education[5] and posed a political and financial threat to that community, although there was an "interconnectedness," to use Lakshmi Subramanian's language, of scholarship and cultural transactions between Brahmins, Pillais, and Chettiars that is evident in the literature and performance arts of the late nineteenth century.[6]

During that period there were ongoing politics in the region that privileged South India and its arts as more authentic and "Indian" than those from the north, which were believed to have been contaminated by Islamic and other foreign traditions. This theory has a long history and was supported not only by proponents of the Dravidian Movement, but also many from the Tamil Brahmin community. Brahmin scholars like U. Ve. Swaminatha Aiyer and Subramania Bharati were both very involved in the Tamil

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[3] Subramanian, Lakshmi. *From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy: A Social History of Music in South India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 152. The franchise was restricted to literate landowners at that time.

[4] Barnett, Marguerite Ross. *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, pp. 16-17.

[5] Subramanian 2006, p. 46 refers to Anil Seal's work, which revealed that Brahmins "represented 68.8 per cent of graduates in the city even while they barely accounted for 3.1 per cent of the total population."

[6] Ibid., p. 147.

Renaissance,[7] which was only later appropriated by the non-Brahmin movement.[8] The Tamil Brahmin community shared some sympathies with the Dravidian cultural agenda of promoting Tamil arts and language as classical and distinct from those of Sanskritized North India. As early as 1891, for example, C. R. Day wrote *The Music and Musical Instruments of Southern India and the Deccan,* in which he argued for "the relative purity of the southern musical tradition."[9] This was deeply influential to the (mostly Brahmin) project of what Lakshmi Subramanian refers to as "the making of the modern classical music tradition in south India"[10] as a separate "Karnatic" tradition deliberately opposed to the Hindustani tradition, which was full of "alien influences."

The non-Brahmin movement tended to conflate the different varieties of Brahmins into a single group that was conceived of as in opposition to all other castes, which were negatively identified as simply "non-Brahmin."[11] Their political position was best expressed through the Justice Party, also known as the South Indian Liberal Federation, which was founded in 1916 with the intention of influencing government policy in favor of the non-Brahmin community. The Non-Brahmin Manifesto that they released that year forced comment on the issue by members of the Brahmin community, who V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai have convincingly argued

> since the last quarter of the nineteenth century…had worked hard to present themselves as respectful and humble purveyors of the commonweal; as an honourable community of civic-minded citizens who could effectively mediate

[7] Selby, Martha. Grow Long, Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 10 and Ramaswamy, Sumathi. Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 46-51.
[8] See Hardgrave 1965.
[9] Subramanian 2006, p. 61.
[10] Ibid., p. 1.
[11] See Hancock, Mary Elizabeth. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999 on this phenomenon.

> native concerns and represent native interests to an essentially alien government.[12]

The responses, especially those of Annie Besant, revealed the extent of "brahmin self-pride and self-love"[13] and further fueled a sense of entitlement and a will "to consolidate that power into definitive social, cultural and political authority."[14]

The divide between westernized elites into Brahmin and non-Brahmin affected culture on all levels. The actors in Sambanda Mudaliyar's troupe were all westernized elites, mostly lawyers and bureaucrats of the British Raj from Brahmin and high non-Brahmin Hindu castes such as the Mudaliar and Pillai communities. Their shared productions did not mean the troupe was free from caste strife. K. S. Rajendran has noted that "Pammal Sambandha Mudaliar admits that the Brahmin/non-Brahmin clashes ruined the functioning of his troupe."[15] Most sabha drama troupes today[16] find their members through networks of family and friends, thus avoiding the problem, which is, in any case, less potent today than it was in the early twentieth century.

The Brahmin community in Chennai is actually more cohesive than Brahmin communities elsewhere, as is evidenced by its especially high level of status summation (covariation of caste and class status) as opposed to that of Brahmins in the rest of India.[17] There has been a concerted effort within the community to "mitigate material inequalities" using mechanisms such as "kinship obligations, strategic deployments of

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[12] Geetha and Rajadurai 1998, p. 4.
[13] Ibid., p. 33.
[14] Ibid., p. 10.
[15] Rajendran, K. S. "Drama and Society: A Study of Tamil Dramatic Performances (1870-1980)." Thesis presented to the Tamil Nadu Council of Historical Research, March 1989, p. 94.
[16] With the exception of S. Ve. Shekher's Natakapriya.
[17] See Table 7, "Varna, Caste or Subcaste of Respondents: By Social Class" in Driver, Edwin D. "Class, Caste, and 'Status Summation' in Urban South India." *Contributions to Indian Sociology (NS)* 16, no. 2 (1982): 225-253., p. 242. "Lower class" was found to consist of 0% Brahmins, 32% Non-Brahmins, and 68% Adi-Dravida, Chakkiliyan, and Other; "middle class" was 21% Brahmin, 64% Non-Brahmin, and 15% Adi-Dravida or Other; and "upper class" was 39% Brahmin, 54% Non-Brahmin, and 7% Other.

social service, and the informal use of hiring preferences."[18] These mechanisms and their effects demonstrate the strength of the bonds between members of that community, which has the highest social status in the city and therefore the most to lose through any changes to the caste system. Like Thorstein Veblen argued, this wealthy class is the most conservative because they have the least incentive to change.[19] Brahmin conservatism extends even to notably orthodox entertainment tastes in the Chennai community.

Tamil Brahmins pride themselves on their traditional tastes and are often characterized by others as being "conservative."[20] Of all the cities in India, it is Chennai that is considered to be the most "cultured." It is well known as a center of the arts, thanks to the Brahmins and other elites, so it makes sense to study issues of taste in relation to it. The Tamil Brahmins' penchant for "classical" arts such as Bharata Natyam and Karnatic music, as well as any art form with a religious influence, is well documented,[21] but far from exhausting the extent of their tastes. Classical performance

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[18] Hancock 1999, p. 45.

[19] Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institution* with introduction by C. Wright Mills (NYC: Mentor Books, 1953). Original 1899, p. 138.

[20] An excellent illustration of this is the case of the "Vagina Monologues" in India in March of 2004. Eve Ensler, the author, went to India with Jane Fonda and Marisa Tomei to perform the play. They were very popular in Mumbai, a city that never though to question or censor the performance. Chennai, however, is a very conservative city and had a different response. As of March 8, 2004 Ensler was scheduled to perform in Chennai on March 12, 2004 at the Music Academy with tickets already for sale (*Indian Express,* "Get Ready for *The Vagina Monologues*," March 8, 2004). However, on March 11, 2004 an article appeared in the paper stating that "[t]he city police commissioner has refused permission to the organizers to stage the play." Police Commissioner R. Nataraj told reporters that he "found certain portions of it 'objectionable'" (Muthalaly, Susan, and Madhavan Karthik. "No *Vagina Monologues* in Chennai, Say Police." *Indian Express.* March 11, 2004). The police almost never reject scripts and most playwrights agree that it is usually just a formality and that the 1954 Tamil Nadu Dramatic Performance Act is outdated and should be repealed. In fact, Mitheran Devanesan of the Madras Players (a fifty-year-old troupe that is famous for its English language performances, particularly of Shakespeare) says that he thinks that the only reason the Act is still around is that "there is not enough unity among the theatre groups to make a common representation to have it repealed" (Susan Muthalaly and Madhavan Karthik, *Indian Express,* March 11, 2004).

[21] See, for example, Allen, Matthew Harp. "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance." *The Drama Review* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 63-100; Gaston, Anne-Marie. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre.* New Delhi: Manohar, 1996; Weidman 2006; L'Armand, Kathleen, and Adrian L'Armand. "Music in

arts confer status on the viewers as well as performers and are considered to be embodiments of Indian/Tamil culture. In this dissertation I broaden the limited understanding of Tamil Brahmin taste by contributing a study of sabhas, one space where the classical arts can be viewed side by side with popular, though often dismissed, comedy plays.

Most Brahmins in Chennai belonged to the Congress Party, and their frequent non-participation in elections as a protest to colonial rule allowed the Justice Party some success in elections. The Justice Party focused its campaign on proving the superiority of non-Brahmin, that is, native Tamil religion, language, and culture, specifically championing the Saiva Siddhanta tradition. This position appealed to "elite non-Brahmin castes with a tradition of orthodoxy,"[22] though some non-Brahmin elites "subscribed to brahminic ways and views." These men were united with Brahmins "by professional, intellectual and cultural concerns" as well as "a set of cultural (and religious) preferments."[23] Many of them joined the Madras Presidency Association (MPA) which was formed in 1917 as "a forum for non-brahmins in the Congress."[24]

The "non-Brahmin" movement, that is, the politicization of the notion of a community of non-Brahmins, soon shifted to a more radical "anti-Brahmin" one. Narendra Subramanian describes the anti-Brahmin shift in this graphic language:

> The Dravidian movement in Tamil Nadu began during the 1910s by raising militant demands for secession and virulently opposed the upper Brahmin caste with appeals which to some extent resembled those of Nazi anti-Semitism.[25]

Madras: The Urbanization of a Cultural Tradition." In *Eight Urban Musical Cultures: Tradition and Change*, edited by Bruno Nettl, 115-145. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978.

[22] Barnett 1976, p. 32.

[23] Geetha and Rajadurai 1998, p. 4.

[24] Ibid., p. 40.

[25] Subramanian, Narendra. *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens, and Democracy in South India.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 7.

This agenda coincided nicely with the strict social reform program of E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker, also known as "Periyar" ("Big Man"). Naicker left the Congress Party in 1922 upon determining that the party was a "tool of Brahmin domination."[26] He had a strong anti-religious and anti-capitalist bent, and advocated for the rights of women. He wanted to see the destruction of the caste system in its entirety and advocated disposing of the need for Brahmins, asking people to marry across caste lines without the use of a priest. He began what was known as the "Self-Respect Movement" in 1925 to encourage non-Brahmins to accomplish those goals. Most radical of all his strategies of undermining Brahmin domination, and the one which cut right to the heart of a Brahmin self-identity that was based on "a set of cultural (and religious) preferments," was the "inversion rite":

> Periar and his followers inverted religious orthodoxy through the denigration of Brahminical norms, the abuse of Hindu deities, epics and scriptures, and the derision of the acts of godmen who claimed divine inspiration….Early Dravidianist inversion rituals included beginning ceremonies at inauspicious hours, garlanding idols with slippers rather than flowers, parading idols around town while beating them with slippers, breaking idols, ceremonially cutting (rather than putting on) the sacred thread worn by Brahmins, displaying placards depicting deities engaged in sexual orgies and, where the DK[27] was strong enough to permit it, beating up rather than honouring visiting religious mendicants. [28]

These incendiary and spectacular methods drew national attention to the movement and to Naicker himself.

Naicker took over leadership of the Justice Party in 1935, then reorganized it as the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) in 1944. Although the Justice Party had always allied with the British against the Congress, assuming that non-Brahmins were more likely to attain justice under foreign rule, this changed with Naicker's formation of the DK. The early

[26] Hardgrave 1965, p. 25.
[27] The DK (Dravida Kazhagam) was a political party founded by Naicker in 1944.
[28] Subramanian 1999, pp. 113-4.

Dravidian parties chose to ally with the British as a strategy for avoiding Brahmin domination in an independent India. This was a very real concern because politically, most Brahmins were supporters of the Indian National Congress, the party of Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, which has ruled India for most of the post-colonial period. Members of the DK, a "highly militant mass organization," wore black and vowed to purge South India of Brahmin tyranny and to achieve a sovereign independent Dravidian Republic.[29] It was their goal to be independent, under the rule of neither the British nor the Brahmins (in an independent India). Although it is true that Periyar's "politics of heresy remained a vehicle of protest rather than of social change,"[30] his ideas, as well as his body of support, have continued to be influential in Tamil politics and the formation of Tamil identity, long after the ideal of Dravidastan had been given up.

Chennai Brahmins conflated Tamil nationalism with Indian nationalism, and saw the revival of traditional arts as victories for the nation. Their pride in Indian culture was evident in their attitude towards both culture and politics. As members of the Indian National Congress, many were active in the Indian independence movement as well as in the reform and revival of the classical arts. It is particularly interesting that the shift from sacred to secular (in music, dance, *and* theater) involved Brahmins, whose identity is so tied to religion, especially in Chennai.

In her work on classical music in South India, Amanda Weidman has analyzed how the term "classical" was used in the pre-Independence period in Madras city. Weidman argued that unlike western music, "Indian music…never had a classical period;

[29] Hardgrave 1965, p. 28.
[30] Subramanian 1999, p. 116.

from its first use, the term was a marker of cultural status and authenticity."[31] Looking forward to the present, many scholars of Indian performance arts, such as Anne-Marie Gaston and Kathryn Hansen, have offered definitions of the "classical" arts that support this claim by stipulating that the classical arts enjoy the patronage of a *dominant* or *elite* social group. In pre-Independence Madras City, this designation unquestionably referred to a community of "notables," as V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai refer to them, who were mostly Brahmin (Tamils, Telugus, Deshastas, and Niyogis) though they included a handful of non-Brahmin "prominent merchants or bankers or respectable landlords who subscribed to brahminic ways and views."[32] The Brahmin community in Madras was dominant politically, socially, and economically, if not demographically.[33]

E. V. Ramasami Naicker protested Independence Day celebrations, the Indian flag, and the Indian Constitution as tools of Brahmin tyranny.[34] It wasn't until 1949, when C. N. Annadurai split the DK, that non-Brahmin politicians recognized independence from colonial rule as an all-India accomplishment. Periyar lost much of his following when he went against many of his own principles and married a girl significantly younger than himself, to whom he wanted to pass on leadership of the party. DK member C. N. Annadurai responded by deciding to form his own party. The Dravida Munnetra (Progressive) Kazhagam (DMK) was formed in 1949 and took with it three-fourths of the DK membership, leaving the DK to stagnate and decline. Annadurai and

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[31] Weidman, Amanda J. Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 5.
[32] Geetha and Rajadurai 1998, p. 4.
[33] The last census to enumerate the number of Brahmins in Madras City was in 1931 (after this date caste was no longer a census category), when 41,700 were identified. Assuming that the percentage of Brahmins in Madras has remained fairly stable at around 3%, the current Brahmin population would be around 226,500 (3% of 7,550,000, a number I found at www.citypopulation.de/World.html on November 30, 2005). In actuality, the percentage of Brahmins in the city has probably risen since 1931. See Milton Singer, Mary Elizabeth Hancock, and Anil Seal for further details on the Brahmin population of Chennai.
[34] Hardgrave 1965, p. 32.

his followers wanted a more democratized party leadership along with an emphasis on issues of language, territory, and cultural identity instead of non-Brahminism and issues of caste. In other words, the DMK shifted its focus from ties of blood to ties of Tamil-ness.

The DMK cultivated a very different understanding of Dravidian identity, Tamil cultural history, and religion's social role than the DK had. The DMK actually made overtures to Brahmins and religious figures. They didn't break religious idols, but instead upheld Pillaiyar and Murugan as "indigenous" deities.[35] It was at this point in history that the Dravidian movement moved from a non-Brahmin to a more Dravidianist platform. This shift was partly necessitated by the increased mobilization of backward castes in the 1940s that split the non-Brahmin community into backward and forward segments. Although they had different agendas with respect to other issues, the two were still able to come together on the concept of Dravidian community and identity.

The period of the 1950s was a time when the DMK was figuring out its own identity, and when it laid "the basis for broader cultural nationalist appeal and expanded mobilization."[36] It was not yet a party in power, but the policies and ideologies that it articulated at this time would become key to understanding later moves and appeals made by the party. This was the period of the "emergence of the politics of cultural nationalism and the mass internalization of Tamil identity."[37] It was also the period in which the sabha theater genre began, wherein Brahmins asserted their *Tamil* identity through use of the language in their dramas.

[35] Subramanian 1999, p. 136.
[36] Barnett 1976, p. 56.
[37] Ibid., p. 89.

In contrast to the Congress, which was dominated by elite Brahmins, the DMK worked to solidify its populist appeal to the "common people," often intertwining it with ethnic appeals. Narendra Subramanian's book, *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization,* is an attempt to reconcile the seemingly incompatible identities of the Dravidian parties as both populist and ethnic nationalist in light of the numerous historical cases where ethnic nationalism has led to violence, intolerance, and authoritarianism, far from being the case in Tamilnadu. Brahmins engaged the caste issue indirectly not by attacking non-Brahmins,[38] but instead by reaffirming their language, values, and culture by creating a genre of theater as well as the *bhajana* groups mentioned by Milton Singer that were also popular in this post-Independence period:

> At the same time, the Dravidian movement for linguistic regionalism, with its championing of Tamil against Sanskrit, Telugu, Hindi, and other Indian languages; of non-Brahmans against Brahmans; and of 'rationalism' against 'superstition' drives the orthodox Hindu, and particularly the Smarta Brahman, to a defense of his religion, his culture, and his caste.[39]

Bhajana groups and sabha dramas were not directed at broad cross-sections of the Tamil population, but rather affirmed Brahmin culture to audiences that were predominantly Brahmin.[40] Producers and patrons of the Sabha theater productions in the city assert their superiority, especially over popular genres such as commercial film and television, by extolling the *purity* of their plays, a characteristic I see as intimately linked to their Brahmin identity.

Even from the 1930s, there was a growing recognition in political arenas of the value of numbers, not just of wealth and ritual status. The Congress Party, with its

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[38] With the possible exception of Cho Ramasamy. See chapter seven for more on Cho's political satire.
[39] Singer, Milton B. When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 240.
[40] Milton Singer estimates the *bhajana* groups to be 80% Brahmin, and with the possible exception of S. Ve. Shekher's audiences, I would estimate the sabha theater audiences to be at least as high.

traditional appeal to voters of wealth and high ritual status, had little credibility with the backward classes, and the Dravidian parties, with their history of anti-casteism and anti-Brahminism, were able to capitalize on that and gain votes. The success of the DMK's populist efforts is clearly demonstrated by these figures: in the 1957 elections in Tamilnadu, there was a 49.3% voter turnout; the 1962 elections, which took place after the DMK's voter registration drives, had a 70.7% voter turnout.[41] In fact, since the DMK came to power in 1967, the Congress Party has never again ruled in the state of Tamilnadu. Subramanian argues that "[n]on-Brahminism endured in Tamilnadu alone because it was linked to Tamil nationalism from the 1930s onwards in a populist discourse."[42]

Marguerite Ross Barnett has traced the changing identity the Dravidian parties have espoused as it has shifted over time from being non-Brahmin to Dravidian and then to Tamil. Once the DMK and the (AI)ADMK [(All India)[43] Anna DMK] became basically a two-party system in the state (after 1972 when M. G. Ramachandran split from the DMK and formed the ADMK), mobilization on the basis of caste was no longer necessary or profitable. Both parties pretty much agreed on the issue of Tamil identity, and didn't want to alienate the Brahmin population, whose votes might prove the difference between the two parties. In fact, Jayalalitha, who served as Chief Minister of the state for many years, has occasionally emphasized her Brahmin status in order to counterbalance public criticism of her as a modern film actress.

[41] Figures cited in Subramanian 1999, p. 171.
[42] Ibid., p. 83.
[43] The "All India" was added to the party's name in 1975 as a way of showing support for Indira Gandhi and the State of Emergency that she had declared at that time.

I would like to suggest that the decline in the popularity of sabha dramas that accelerated in the late 1980s may be related to a shift in political thought from anti-Brahmin sentiments to a pro-Tamil ideology within these parties, a gradual process whose completion was marked by the AIADMK party members' acceptance of Brahmin J. Jayalalitha as their leader after the 1987 death of Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran. These changes made affirmation of Brahmin culture through the arts a less compelling and urgent agenda, allowing the community to focus on more practical concerns like the computerized horoscope matching center run by TAMBRAAS.[44] The loss of urgency and often relevance of these dramas to the lives of Chennai Brahmins also contributed to the loss of audiences, and required troupes that wished to remain commercially viable to rethink their work. Once Tamil nationalism ceased to be a viable issue, campaign platforms in the state focused on more economic and local issues. The shared history of the two major parties, however, has had a lasting effect on the state and its politics.

Language, in India in general but especially in Tamilnadu, has a history of politicization and association with regional identity. At the time of independence (August 15, 1947), India was divided into states based on Great Britain's "administrative units" in the former colony. The Madras Presidency was one of many of these units that crossed linguistic boundaries. The debate raged in the Central Government about whether to redraw the state boundaries along linguistic lines, but with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru against the idea as a threat to national unity that would encourage

[44] This is a service for arranging marriages. They keep the horoscopes of around five thousand Tamil Brahmins from around the world on file at all times. For a fee, they will provide a list of contact information for potential mates with compatible horoscopes who meet the criteria (age, location, salary, level of education, etc.) specified by the client. (My interview at the TAMBRAAS main office in R. A. Puram, April 21, 2004.)

disruption and disintegration, it remained only a debate until 1953. That year marked the creation of the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh after the movement won the support of the Madras government and the Tamilnadu Congress Committee and one of its leaders fasted to death.[45]

In addition to the linguistic problem of state reorganization, the greater one of a language for the nation also deeply affected Tamilnadu. There was a strong push in newly independent India to assert an indigenous linguistic identity that resulted in the 1965 decision to change India's official language from English to Hindi. Tamilians responded with two months of demonstrations, riots, and violence until the Official Languages Act was finally amended. The threat to the Tamil language was truly seen as a threat to Tamil identity and people.[46] The assertion of Tamil identity that has been manifested in the love and celebration of the language has remained strong as is evidenced by, among other things, the Tamil language comedy drama troupes of the post-Independence period. Choice of language, in this heavily politicized linguistic atmosphere, always made a statement. K. Balachander's 1985 film *Sindhu Bhairavi,* for example, includes a character that "has strong feelings that South Indian classical music is not sung primarily in the South Indian language Tamil…[because] this has made it inaccessible to the general Tamil public in the state." The author of this review on the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) laments that "this is a truth and such an elitism has pervaded south indian (sic) classical music for the better part of [the] last century."[47]

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[45] See Mitchell, Lisa. "From Medium to Marker: The Making of a Mother Tongue in Modern South India." Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2004.
[46] See Robert Hardgrave's work for more information on regional politics in India. See Hardgrave 1965 and Sumathi Ramasamy 1997 for more information about language riots in Tamilnadu.
[47] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0155180/, viewed on May 15, 2007.

Tamil, in this account, is the vernacular, the language of the people, through which they express their emotions and form their culture.

The Tamil language, however, is very complex. There are so many varieties that not only is the use of Tamil a political statement in itself, but a further statement is made by the *type* of Tamil used in a play, film, or any other artistic endeavor. The language is often referred to as "Tamil diglossia" because the written and spoken varieties are so different. For example, the verb "paṭittukkoṇṭirukkiṟēn" ("I have been studying") in written form would be pronounced "paṭiccukkiṭṭirukkṟe" in spoken. There are words that are only used in spoken Tamil and words that are only used in written or "literary" Tamil. Kamil Zvelebil has been quoted as saying that "Colloquial Tamil and Literary Tamil will be considered as the two opposite poles of the same language."[48] Different media use different degrees and combinations of the two. For example, newspapers tend to be literary, novels mix forms depending on the background of characters, and popular magazines will often print the spoken form.

S. Arokianathan has documented the high (literary) versus low (colloquial) varieties of language used in the different types of radio programs broadcast on All India Radio. He concluded that when considering radio programs that were dramas, one had to take the target audience (women, children, farmers, etc.) into account in order to determine the language variety. The spoken language becomes especially important as more and more Tamilians, both in the diaspora and in Madras itself, attend English-medium schools. These Tamils can speak their native language, but are often unable to read or write it. Their spoken Tamil, however, tends to be of a more literary variety than

[48] In Deivasundaram, N. *Tamil Diglossia*. Tirunelveli: Nainar Pathippagam, 1981, p. 18.

uneducated Tamils'.[49] Spoken Tamil itself is not standardized but is actually broken into a vast number of dialects that are based on regional and caste differences, among other factors. Sabha dramas, even when they are written, are in a spoken Tamil format that gives the flavor of the dialect and indicates the rhythm of speech.

Political speeches are in a form known as "mēṭaittamiḻ" or "platform Tamil," which is a performance genre of Tamil spoken on literary and political stages (*mēṭai*). The form is marked by poetic conventions and the status of the speaker, as John Bernard Bate has argued, corresponds to an "aesthetic distinction between 'refinedness' (*cemmai*), as marked by literary style and citation, and vernacular 'vulgarity' (*koccai*)."[50] The Justice Party and Congress politicians had made their speeches in English or in spoken Tamil, but the DMK, particularly Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi (current Chief Minister), brought about what Bate calls an "oratorical revolution" where speech was modeled on the written word and therefore required literacy.[51] This revolution linked stage performances with politics and the Tamil language and cultural identity in a new way in the late 1940s and early 1950s, just before Tamil language sabha comedy plays began to emerge in Madras. Those plays are deliberately written in a colloquial language that is very different from the more literary variety of Tamil found in the historical and mythological plays by professional companies that had come before or from the poetic language found in the plays written by M. Karunanidhi and other leaders of the DMK. The colloquial (low, by literary standards) language of the plays has ensured that they receive little to no recognition as literature, but they simultaneously illustrate the

[49] See Arokianathan, S. *Language Use in Mass Media*. New Delhi: Creative Publishers, 1988.
[50] Bate, John Bernard. "*Mēṭaittamiḻ:* Oratory and Democratic Practice in Tamilnadu." Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000, p. 5.
[51] Ibid., p. 91.

superiority of the Brahmin language and culture through the interactions of the families in the plays.

Most of the sabha plays, with the exception of S. Ve. Shekher's, are in a dialect commonly known as "Brahmin Tamil." The dialect is marked by its Sanskritized vocabulary and a difference in pronunciation of particular verb endings, among other things. This is the dialect spoken at home by the Tamil Brahmin community, and the writers and actors choose to work in the dialect most comfortable for them and thus mark their language in this way in the plays. It is easily understood by Tamils of all communities, but it does tend to keep the audiences insular. Films, for example, may use the Brahmin dialect, but usually only to mark a particular character and for comic effect. Marina, Crazy Mohan, and Cho Ramasamy are representatives of sabha playwrights who prefer this marked Brahmin language as the primary dialect in their dramas. They may play on other language characteristics and differences as part of the comedy by introducing other dialects of Tamil for comic effect in the same way that Brahmin dialect is often used in other media like television and film.

Although the division between Brahmins and non-Brahmins had been established long before, the statewide Tamil Brahman Association (TAMBRAAS), which specifically addresses Brahmin concerns, was not founded until 1980.[52] That was the year that the Mandal Commission made its recommendation to reserve 27% of all central government jobs for backward castes in addition to the 22.5% already reserved for scheduled castes and tribes. These recommendations were not implemented until ten years later, by Prime Minister V. P. Singh. His decision led to violent protests and self-

[52] The organization claims to speak for all Brahmins, but not all Brahmins support TAMBRAAS.

immolations particularly among higher-caste students.[53] At this same time (1990), M. S. S. Pandian noted "a revival of iconoclastic rationalism and anti-Brahminism" at the sixth state-level DMK conference.[54] Mary Hancock's research has convincingly demonstrated that the Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai still felt victimized ten years after the implementation of the Mandal Commission's recommendations.

Hancock found that most Chennai Brahmins are worried about the effects of the reservations and believe that decisions about enrollment in educational institutions or employment in government jobs should be based on merit alone. In many interviews conducted by Hancock, "Brahmans also claimed that they were the recipients of day-to-day, informal discrimination—insults (including the degrading term *pārppaṉ*, which was sometimes used to refer to Brahmans), street harassment, and petty crime."[55] Gopalakrishnan, then president of TAMBRAAS, told Hancock that "TAMBRAAS had been founded to combat the harassment and violence to which Brahman women were subjected by 'anti-Brahman rowdies and gangsters'" (see also Jagadheesan 1991).[56] The organization, in other words, was viewed as necessary to protect Brahmin culture, especially as it was embodied in its women, reinforcing once again the link between morality and class status.

Brahmin organizations such as TAMBRAAS and most members of the community tend to support the AIADMK over the DMK because of Jayalalitha herself,

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[53] See Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr., and Stanley A. Kochanek. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation.* 6th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000, pp. 201-203.
[54] Pandian, M. S. S. "From Exclusion to Inclusion: Brahminism's New Face in Tamil Nadu" in *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 (September 1-8, 1990): 1938-1939, p. 1938.
[55] Hancock 1999, p. 41.
[56] Ibid., p. 40.

but also because of the more culturally conservative policies they promote.[57] The sabha theater artists tend to support Jayalalitha not only because she is a Brahmin, but because she was once one of them. She got involved with politics through her film work with M. G. Ramachandran, but she got into film through the theater. Like her mother and her aunt, she acted with Y. Gee. Parthasarathy's United Amateur Artists for a while, debuting in their 1964 production of *Undersecretary* in the role of Kantha.[58]

Drama, particularly Tamil language drama that reinforces *Tamil* Brahmin identity, is a logical arena for Brahmin affirmation of their particular culture. Dravidian party politicians like C. N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi wrote dramas and screenplays and spread anti-Brahmin propaganda through literature, drama, and film. Robert Hardgrave has referred to this as a "cultural offensive," and it was launched early on in the Dravidian movement by DK dramatic troupes.[59] Their plays helped solidify a sense of community and unique Tamil identity that was often contrasted to Brahmin cultural history, which was considered distinct from that of the Dravidians. The cultural offensive of the Dravidian movement was then balanced by the sabha dramas and the Brahmin cultural defensive.

Because both major political parties in Tamilnadu (the DMK and the AIADMK) are products of Dravidian ideology, the political lobbying done by TAMBRAAS is minimal. Primarily they run their horoscope matching center and provide funding for

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[57] Specifically mentioned during the 2004 elections when the AIADMK was allied with the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party were the *anna daanam* (offerings of food) in temples scheme, moral lessons for children at renowned temples on weekends, the anti-conversion law, insistence on discussion of Godra in conjunction with discussion of Gujarat, the crushing of the public employees strike, and support of the majority (Hindus) over the minorities. In addition, many vote, not *for* the AIADMK, but *against* the DMK, whose leader M. Karunanidhi has displayed many "bouts of anti-brahmin rhetoric" (*Indian Express*, April 19, 2004).

[58] See Chapter Six for an analysis of this play.

[59] See Hardgrave 1965, pp. 30-1.

poor Brahmins to complete important rituals.[60] Brahmins developed outlets, such as the sabha theater, which were outside of politics and the mass media favored by the populist Dravidian parties to affirm the worth and contributions of their community within the community itself rather than to justify themselves to the majority population.

An excellent illustration of this phenomenon is Brahmin playwright Venkat's recollection of the fate of his 1986 play *Uyiril Kalanta Uṟavē* (*Relationships Mixed in Life*), which criticized Brahmin values such as feeding servants in the back yard instead of in the hall (as the living room is known to Tamils) and attempted to "expose hypocrisies"[61] within the community. TAMBRAAS, along with many individual prominent Brahmin actors such as Major Sundararajan, S. Ve. Shekher, Srikanth, and Delhi Ganesh, spoke out against the play and tried to have it banned. Venkat recalls that the controversy went on for two to three months in all the magazines and he was "excommunicated from the community for some time."[62] He was eventually given police permission[63] to perform the play after removing some inflammatory dialogues and promising not to add new ones. At this point, he says that "The Brahmins wanted me to do the play in their midst to reform the Brahmin society, but not to the public. I

[60] My interview with a secretary of TAMBRAAS at their R. A. Puram office on April 21, 2004.
[61] My interview with Venkat, October 7, 2003.
[62] My interview with Venkat October 7, 2003.
[63] All scripts for dramas performed in Chennai need to be cleared by the police. Shonali Muthalaly reports a funny story in accordance with this law: "Apparently, every theatre group has to get permission from the local police station before they perform a play, irrespective of where they are performing. To obtain permission, the script has to be passed by the police and the play signed by the playwright. One director, who recently staged the 'Twelfth Night' (sic) was repeatedly asked to get its author's signature at the police station. When the bewildered, and rather shaken, director stammered that it's a play by Shakespeare, who was dead, the unflappable policeman said 'Oh…Ok, Sir. Ask Mr. Shakespeare's close relative to sign then'" (*The Hindu*, December 10, 2003).

refused."[64] Eventually, TAMBRAAS paid him three thousand rupees for the rights to the script, which they never performed. He no longer has a copy of it.

Venkat believes *Uyiril Kalanta Uṛavē* is his best play, and he also sold it to the cinema where it was produced as a film by K. Bhagyaraj in 1988 called *Itu Namma Āḷ* (*This is our Man*).[65] The main story concerns a graduate from a lower-caste barber community who pretends to be a Brahmin and puts on a "sacred thread" in order to earn money for his mother's eye operation. His masquerade is successful and gets him a job, a loan, and a Brahmin wife. The problem comes when the truth about his identity is revealed. The "rest of the film is on how he saves both the father and the daughter [his father-in-law and wife], thus making religion bow before humanity."[66] The film was just as incendiary among the Tamil Brahmin community as the play, but was seen by a broader cross-section of the population, which only added to its offense. Tamil film review website lolluexpress.com includes a page for readers to comment on various reviews and films, and the title of the page for *Itu Namma Āḷ* ("Ithu Namma Aal") is "WAS BAGYARAJ HARSH ON BRAHMINS / IYERS ???" which was prompted by the fact that "our readers say that 'Brahmin community was insulted.'"[67] Some of the readers thought the film was "hilarious" or "funny," but the overwhelming response from within the Brahmin community was that it was "irritating," "too much," "quite offensive," and "inflammatory." There's even an anecdote that when M. G. Ramachandran's Brahmin wife, Janaki, saw the film, she got angry and walked out.[68]

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[64] Gopalie 2002, p. 258.
[65] I do not know if there was any conflict with him selling this play twice. He told Gopalie about TAMBRAAS and me about the film, though he did characterize the cinema sale as "backdoor."
[66] This summary is from the Kannada remake, which is said to be "a copycat of the original Tamil version." Found on http://www.musicindiaonline.com/ar/i/movie_name/8650/1/, viewed on May 21, 2007.
[67] http://www.lolluexpress.com/idhu_comm.htm, viewed May 21, 2007.
[68] http://www.lolluexpress.com/idhu_comm.htm, viewed May 21, 2007.

Apparently there was a different tenor to the criticism of Brahmins in this play and film than in the many sympathetic sabha plays that also exaggerate Brahmin characteristics for the sake of humor. Perhaps the undercurrent of Brahmin superiority that is present in the plays is missing in *Itu Namma Āḷ*.

Conclusion

Sabha comedy plays provide a space in which Brahmins can engage the caste issue indirectly by reaffirming their language, values, and culture through the characters and plots of the dramas. The plays thus function both as an apology for the Brahmin community and as a celebration of its culture. Originally a response to the anti-Brahmin sentiments espoused by the Dravidian Movement, sabha dramas serve to affirm the worth and contributions of Brahmins to society. Even though the anti-Brahmin movement has lost its potency in recent years, it is clear that the Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai still feels its effects. Some of the tools by which the community asserts its *Tamilness* include the use of colloquial, Brahmin dialect language and the depiction of "typical" Brahmin families on stage.

The plays, in their language, content, production, and consumption, are anchored by a preconception of Brahmin superiority, but their comic nature and dismissal by the press allow Brahmins to laugh at themselves and confront stereotypes indirectly, as jokes. The jokes are designed to point out contradictions between actual practice and ideals, and in doing so shape both the way Brahmins think about themselves and act as a corrective to inappropriate behavior. The following chapter looks at the elements that make up a sabha drama to create an overall aesthetic that projects and reflects Tamil Brahmin identity.

Chapter Four

TWO OR THREE PEOPLE JUST STANDING ON STAGE: CHARACTERISTICS AND AESTHETICS OF SABHA DRAMAS

Sabha dramas are a genre not just because they share a political ideology and a patronage system, but because they share a structure and aesthetic shaped by that system. Instead of a performance being linked to a particular theater in which the stage set can stay and to which audience members must travel, a structure that most western plays (even in Chennai) follow, sabha plays, though they may run for years, shift venue every time. It is the audience that remains in the theater while the various troupes and plays come to them along with all their sets, props, and sound and light equipment. This structure has had significant effects on the style and content of sabha plays over the years.

The most effective way to demonstrate the boundaries and ambiguities of the genre is to use a representative play as an example. Kathadi Ramamurthy's 1971 *Honeymoon Couple*[1] is one of the most popular of what is often referred to as the "pure comedy" play repertoire that became popular during the peak of sabha theater from about 1965 to 1985. This is when the genre had a formula that worked and new troupes were splintering off from the old ones as well as starting with all newcomers to the field, and all of them were flourishing.[2] I analyze *Honeymoon Couple* as a typical play that illustrates the basic characteristics of the genre in order to address the structure, content,

[1] This was the tenth play produced by Kathadi Ramamurthy for his troupe Stage Creations. I got the inauguration date from Kathadi Ramamurthy, though Crazy Mohan dates his first play to "Crazy Thieves in Palavakkam," which he wrote for S. Ve. Shekher in 1976. See Appendix D for my translation of the first scene of *Honeymoon Couple.*

[2] See Appendix F for a partial family tree of sabha drama troupes. Kathadi Ramamurthy, for example, left Viveka Fine Arts, to which Cho Ramasamy had come from United Amateur Artists. In 2004, at age 67, Kathadi celebrated forty years of his troupe Stage Creations and fifty years of acting with a festival put on by the troupe and Raadhu's Nataka Academy. The celebrations included eight nights of dramas from May 1-4, 6-9, 2004. (See Figures 4 and 5 for the program of this celebration.)

and aesthetics of sabha plays. It was written for Kathadi's five-year-old drama troupe Stage Creations by the then-unknown comedy writer Crazy Mohan.[3] Mohan was trained as an engineer, but started writing plays and humorous short stories at an early age, soon turning that hobby into a career.[4] The play has been popular over the years both as a live performance and on television as one of Doordarshan's "Sunday Dramas," produced by S. Gopalie in the early 1980s. This play is still regularly performed, and I saw it several times over the course of my fieldwork. It is truly one of the classics of Tamil comedy theater, thanks to both Crazy Mohan's writing and Kathadi Ramamurthy's acting. The characteristics of sabha drama that are visible in *Honeymoon Couple* helped to define the genre from then on.

Scripts, Plots, and Themes

Sabha plays, in general, are scripted, not improvised. Most troupes are organized around a central figure who may be either the playwright (Crazy Mohan's Crazy Creations, Cho Ramasamy's Viveka Fine Arts, Marina's Rasika Ranga, K. S. Nagarajan's Kala Nilaiyam) or the lead actor (S. Ve. Shekher's Natakapriya, Kathadi Ramamurthy's Stage Creations, Y. Gee. Mahendran's United Amateur Artists). New troupes generally start when an actor or writer who has been part of another troupe becomes famous enough to earn a chance from the sabhas to draw audiences on his own.[5] They may take with them some actors from the old troupe and also find friends and

[3] This was several years before Mohan wrote any plays for S. Ve. Shekher (1975-6) or for his own troupe Crazy Creations (founded in 1979). In fact, "Honeymoon Couple" was written before "Crazy" Mohan got his nickname, which came only with his 1976 play "Crazy Thieves in Palavakkam," written for S. Ve. Shekher. Adopting a nickname from a famous role or title has been a common practice in Tamilnadu, with "Shivaji" Ganesan as a famous example; "Kathadi" Ramamurthy himself is another. When Crazy Mohan started his own troupe in 1979 with the play *Alauddin and 100 Watts Bulb*, Kathadi actually helped out by playing Crazy Mohan's role since Crazy worked and couldn't always make his own plays.

[4] http://www.crazymohan.com/index.htm, viewed May 28, 2007.

[5] It is also common for writers to write plays for many different troupes before forming their own.

family members to join them in their new endeavor. Occasionally, as in the case of Rail Priya or Dummies Drama, a troupe of all unknowns will appear. V. Sreevatson, the certified accountant who started Dummies Drama with his business partner and a group of friends,[6] loved theater but felt that Tamil theater had started going downhill in the 1990s. He wrote his first play, *Women's Rea,*[7] and produced it with a group entirely made up of first-time actors in 1999. Things were difficult for this troupe, which without a big name behind it, has had to pay for everything independently and work very hard to earn the support of sabhas.[8] This is an unusual scenario, however, and most troupes begin with either an established lead actor or writer.

Playwright-centered troupes tend to adhere much more closely to the written script than actor-centered troupes. Actor-centered troupes generally own the rights to plays by several different writers, and have a great deal of freedom to improvise or to change the dialogue or the play as they like. Kathadi, for example, has a collection of unpublished plays handwritten in long notebooks, covered with marginal notes, and stamped with the seal of police approval. Police scrutiny of drama scripts is generally fairly cursory in Tamilnadu, but they do watch for attacks on the government.[9]

All play scripts in Chennai, including those of the sabha theater, need to be submitted to the police for approval in accordance with the Tamilnadu Dramatic

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[6] The core group consists of four accountants. The entire troupe has eighteen members: fourteen actors, three actresses, and one musician.

[7] This title is too obscure for anyone to get the reference, but according to Sreevatson it is meant to refer to a Latin word meaning "intention to defraud."

[8] My interview with V. Sreevatson, October 23, 2003.

[9] In fact, Cho Ramasamy faced a defamation case filed by Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha in 2003 as a result of cartoons published in his journal *Tughlaq* that "sullied the image of the government and the Chief Minister." The *Indian Express* stated that with the new cases against Cho, the cartoonist, and the publisher of *Tughlaq,* "the total number of defamation cases filed by the government against leaders of political parties and various publications has touched 82." *Indian Express,* "Cho Faces Defamation Case," November 25, 2003.

Performances Act of 1954. This act was set up by the state government after a play by M. R. Radha "led to a law and order problem."[10] Every page of an approved script must be officially stamped, and this needs to be done at least one month before the inauguration date. This means that because scripts tend to go through many incarnations in rehearsal and the final product may bear little relation to the originally submitted script. Most writers have their doubts about whether anyone actually reads their work.[11] In fact, the police hardly ever suggest deletions of scenes or lines for sabha plays, so the few instances where it has happened are significant. Cho Ramasamy, with his overtly political satires, has had more trouble with this than any other sabha playwright.

Unlike the strict rules governing film releases, no state official will view the final version of the play to determine whether or not the approved script is being strictly followed.[12] In addition, there are comedians like S. Ve. Shekher who do not follow a written script very closely, but will improvise jokes to keep the play updated with regard to current events and audiences returning to the theater. These insertions, deletions, and/or alterations are completely unregulated by the state.

Producers and audiences, who both represent the very specific community of middle-class urban Tamil Brahmins, also play a role in these debates about appropriate topics and jokes, and since they are more directly involved than the state, their concerns actively affect the format and content of sabha plays. One reason, perhaps, that the state

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[10] See Shankar, S. "Introduction" to *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan, viii-xxxi. Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2001, p. xvi.

[11] I was told by several informants (because these speculations were made in confidence I am keeping them anonymous) that the police simply don't have the time to read scripts. In addition, several speculated that the job is probably relegated to junior officers whose only real concern is that the Chief Minister is not offended in any way. They may strike a few lines, but never more than that.

[12] There are, of course, ways for filmmakers to get around the censors. The most common is to simply give exhibitors a version of the film with all the portions cut by the censor replaced. Videos are much less regulated, and censor officers cannot inspect films in rural areas on a regular basis. See Dickey, Sara. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 124.

feels little need to censor sabha plays is that this community exercises a great deal of self-censorship that is stricter than any law would require.

Kathadi Ramamurthy's plays, like most sabha plays, are meant to be heard and/or seen, not read. Very few are published. S. Ve. Shekher recently (2004) published nearly all of his plays with his picture on the covers,[13] and they are his not because he has written them, but because he owns the rights. These plays are a troupe's security in the sabha theater world. No one else can perform the plays and they tend to be very possessive about them, which is also a characteristic of *terukkūttu* and other folk theater genres.[14] Occasionally a writer will retain the rights to his work (Mouli, K. K. Raman) and the troupe will pay for each performance.[15] This does not mean, however, that the plays are published and the writers are trying to earn money. Mouli, for example, is simply too busy with films to stage any of his own dramas, and doesn't want them published because sequences could be useful for him in later film work or lifted by other filmmakers.[16]

This possessiveness about a troupe's cultural property is not the main reason, however, that sabha plays are not published. The main reason is that the writers and actors believe that their work is only effective *in performance*. They don't publish their plays simply because they don't believe anyone would read them. They looked surprised

[13] See Figure 6-7 for images of the jackets of his books and a selection of audiocassette covers.
[14] Richard Frasca, for example, in his research on *terukkūttu,* found that many drama troupes would let him record performances but not see the paper/palm leaf manuscripts that were the archive of the troupe, because those were what made their *terukūttu* style unique and distinct from all the other troupes. "These manuscripts represented an organic link with previous generations of great *kūttu* teachers and artistes, a continuity that had to be maintained and guarded if a group was going to be successful in the rapidly modernizing India of today." Frasca, Richard Armando. *The Theater of the Mahabharata: Terukkūttu Performancesin South India.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 39.
[15] Because most troupes do not earn money with their performances this means that these plays simply do not get performed. Several of K. K. Raman's plays are published by Alliance in Chennai.
[16] My interview with Mouli, August 19, 2003.

at the very idea of publishing. These are *dramas,* I was told again and again, they are meant to be performed in order to be appreciated. There is no habit of reading dramas in Chennai, and the few Tamil dramas that are published are printed in very small runs. Most dramas are not considered worth spending time on. Attending a performance is social; it is an enjoyable escape, but why would anyone read a string of jokes on a page? I was asked.

A much more common way to fix a Tamil sabha play text other than in print has been to record a performance text on film. There are many examples of films that are not much more than filmed play performances, and there are directors like Mouli and K. Balachander who moved to film directly from the theater. Balachander is famous for films that "analyse unusual or complicated interpersonal relationships and social themes"[17] and made Komal Swaminathan's *Water! Water!* and many of his own plays such as *Etir Nīccal* and *Nāṇal* into films. Cho Ramasamy has several plays such as *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* and *Maṉam Oru Kuraṅku* (*Mind is a Monkey*)that were made into films. Even some of the full-length comedies have been made into films such as Crazy Mohan's *Marriage Made in Saloon* and S. Ve. Shekher's *Atiruṣṭakāran* (*Lucky Guy*).[18]

The dialogue is the most important component of the sabha comedy plays, and the intonation and timing that accompany it are what keep the jokes alive. This means that it is important for the audience to be able to hear, and a poor sound system can ruin a

[17] http://www.answers.com/topic/k-balachander, viewed May 28, 2007.
[18] *Marriage Made in Saloon* was produced as *Poikkal Kudhirai* by K. Balachander and Shekher directed his own play as the film *Krishna Krishna*.

play.[19] Most of the sabha actors are amateurs who are not particularly trained in voice projection,[20] so the dramas are well-miked. Kathadi, like most of the sabha troupes, usually uses three long, low microphones across the front of the stage. These are less intrusive to the performance, but also less effective than a set-up like S. Ve. Shekher's where there are four standing microphones into which actors speak directly. Critic M. Tangarasu has lamented that with these plays all the techniques designed for theater are excluded. Tamil theater is at the sad state, he wrote in 2000, where it is enough for two or three people to stand on stage and say lines that the (not particularly discerning) audience can laugh at.[21]

Kathadi's timing is perfect and his interaction with Sri Lalitha, the actress who usually plays opposite him, has been polished over the years, especially in plays like *Honeymoon Couple*, which they have performed together hundreds of times.[22] He is not, however, an improviser like S. Ve. Shekher. He sticks to his scripts pretty closely, but knows where he can cut if necessary, and when jokes have lost their relevance and need to be deleted or updated. Kathadi Ramamurthy is widely respected as a performer and a man, and considered to be one of the best comic actors the Tamil language has ever seen. S. Ve. Shekher said that he was the "best" in comedy.[23] He has a sense for his audience and a humorous manner that keeps them laughing.

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[19] For example, at a 2004 Rasika Ranga play at the Narada Gana Sabha, the sound system had such terrible problems that it was practically impossible to hear the actors. Audience members kept jumping up and shouting for them to be louder or to fix the mikes, and it was quite an embarrassing show for this established and respected troupe.

[20] Some of the best at this are R. Neelakanthan and Karur Rangarajan.

[21] Tangarasu, M. *Tamiḻil Sabha Nāṭaka Marapu* ("The Sabha Drama Tradition in Tamil"). In *Tamiḻ Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum* ("Tamil Drama—Yesterday Today"), edited by K. Bhagavathy, 86-95. Chennai: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 2000, p. 93.

[22] She had been with his troupe for 24 years at the time of the festival.

[23] January 19, 2004 at function for Hamsadhvani's inauguratory drama, *Kalyāṇattil Kalāṭṭā* by Raadhu with Kathadi Ramamurthy in the role of the boy's father.

Instead of being divided into three or five acts, which are further divided into scenes the way most western plays are, these plays are divided into lots of small scenes. A typical play will have between twenty and forty individual scenes; *Honeymoon Couple* has only seventeen. In production, the scenes are separated by a brief period of darkness and some recorded music. Sometimes a set change will take place during the break. There is nearly always a longer break of about ten minutes for an intermission about halfway through the play.[24] This is a time for the audience to get snacks, use the restroom, and chat for a few minutes.

Kathadi has worked with many writers over the years, often being the first to give a chance to new playwrights. These different voices make it easier for him to avoid the repetition of jokes that has been a real problem for someone like Crazy Mohan, who writes all of Crazy Creation's plays. It is still difficult to keep variety in the plays and retain the audience's interest, and Kathadi says that

> [o]nce they [the writers] succeed with us, they get to know the artists and their potentialities. This is the problem. Once they know this they begin to write for the artists to exploit their talents, and fail to tell a story. Here and this way (sic) the play fails. The audience begins to feel that they are seeing the same character over and over again.[25]

This is, in fact, a problem that Kathadi in particular has faced over the years. Actress and theater scholar Pritham Chakravarty voiced the opinion of many when she said that Kathadi Ramamurthy has been playing the same role for his whole career and therefore hasn't grown as an actor.[26]

[24] The only times I have seen the intermission cut are when pre-show functions lasted so long that scenes had to be cut and the play shortened in order for the show to let out at a reasonable hour.
[25] Gopalie 2002, p. 107.
[26] My interview, February 25, 2004.

The three types of plays typically seen on the sabha stage over the years were "continuous non-stop comedy plays," "tolerable murder-mystery plays," and "historical and mythological plays,"[27] of which the comedies have been the majority by far. These comedies not only portray but also exaggerate the "normal confusion" of culture for humorous effect, not social reform. This is in distinct opposition to the "DK/DMK plays [which] were an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary Tamil society."[28] The pure comedy plays that sabhas tend to favor as the most commercially successful consist of plots that simply string together a series of jokes. Many of these jokes are considered "kaṭi" jokes, which means they bite or sting. These one-line jokes are dismissed as having no content and the attitude towards them implies that they are "stupid" jokes. There is no respect in Tamil culture for this type of humor, which is always discussed in a dismissive manner, but it is clearly appreciated by audiences, who continue to laugh.

The plays, which are known for having extremely thin plots, include many jokes about how ridiculous film plots are, often complete with mock summaries. In these instances, the plays pride themselves on the quality and veracity of their plots and characters, implying that however bad these two things may be in the play, at least they are superior to what is found in film. The sabha drama artists are happy to be associated with the classical performance genres, but they make a point of being "distinct" (in

[27] Shankar, S. "Introduction" to *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan, viii-xxxi. Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2001, p. xiv.
[28] Rajendran, K. S. "Drama and Society: A Study of Tamil Dramatic Performances (1870-1980)." Thesis presented to the Tamil Nadu Council of Historical Research, March 1989, p. 138.

Bourdieu's sense) from film. This distinction and the critique of films is found not only outside of the theater but also explicitly made in the plays themselves.[29]

It is important to note that the plays *do* actually have plots, despite many accusations to the contrary. In contrast to the dramas, there are comedy shows in Chennai that really are nothing but jokes. For example, the Humour Club International, which has several branches in Chennai, is often "invited by many organizations, both private and government, to stage humour shows for their staff members tied down by hectic schedules."[30] These programs usually run about thirty minutes and consist of "jokes, humour music, miming, magic, skits and ventriloquism."[31] There are also people like M. T. Vedantham who conduct hour-long humor shows that consist of "50-60 non-stop jokes"[32] which are gleaned primarily from Tamil magazines.

Although the plays may include jokes similar to the ones found in magazines and humor shows, the difference is that they have a connecting thread that can keep audiences interested for the two-hour show, even though the plot resolution is usually obvious within the first ten minutes. The most common plot line is organized around the Tamil proverb, "Make a marriage, even if you tell a thousand lies."[33] The most common themes are marriage alliances and/or married life, which have continued to resonate with middle-class urban audiences, even as they redefine themselves as "modern." Definitions of "modernity," and indeed of "middle-classness," are, as Sanjay Joshi helpfully argues,

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[29] Excellent examples can be found in Ramasamy, Cho. *Maṉam Oru Kuraṅku.* Madras: Alliance, 1997. Translated by Kristen Rudisill as *The Mind is a Monkey* (Unpublished manuscript, 2002) and *Eppavum Nī Rājā* (*You Are Always a King*). Dialogue by Venkat. Story, Making it as a Play, Direction, and Production by S. Ve. Shekher. Madras: Alliance, 2004. (Inaugurated 1994).

[30] V. Lakshmanan, secretary of Humour Club International, Madras Main Chapter, quoted in Vijayalakshmi, B. "They Swear by Therapeutic Value of Humour Seriously." *Indian Express,* August 28, 2003.

[31] Vijayalakshmi August 28, 2003.

[32] Bhuvaneshwari, V. "Trading in Laughter." *Indian Express,* July 19, 2003.

[33] *Āyiram poy colliyāvatu oru kalyāṇattai cey.*

fractured and often contradictory due to the way the differing traditions and ideas about appropriate social relations found in different parts of India are combined with ideas of the modern.[34] Traditional notions of marriage and family are still central to modern imaginings of Tamil culture,[35] and this has been fodder for the dramas. Farley Richmond, writing in 1990, commented that

> [i]n Madras one may find plays that are concerned primarily with family and social issues. The generation gap is a favorite theme among Madras playwrights. Many of the contemporary plays show older, tradition-bound parents attempting to come to grips with the new lifestyles and changing values of their children.[36]

Honeymoon Couple has a plot with a slight twist, that it is okay to tell a thousand lies if they result not in a marriage, but in a honeymoon. The marriage, in this case, occurred twenty years ago, but the honeymoon did not follow. This allows for some great humor that works because of the inversion of roles and a clarification of what is appropriate for people of different ages in Tamil culture with regard to love, sex, and romance. It is the aged man, wearing dentures, who is longing for a honeymoon with his mortified and reluctant forty-five-year-old wife, while their children stay chastely at home to attend college.

I have translated a great deal of *Honeymoon Couple* from Kathadi's handwritten and much-annotated notebook, and it is clear that like many of his plays, it has undergone a lot of change over the years although the basic plot and main characters have remained constant. Kathadi Ramamurthy is well known for several roles, actually taking his name

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[34] Joshi, Sanjay. *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

[35] In the context of a detailed discussion of kinship patterns and acceptable marriage partners, Margaret Trawick wrote in 1990 that "[m]arriage is by far the most important ritual in Tamil Nadu, by far the most important event in the life of the individual there" (Trawick, Margaret. *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990, p. 149).

[36] Richmond, Farley P. "Characteristics of the Modern Theatre." In *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance,* edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, 387-462. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 402.

"Kathadi" from a character in an early play, and his person has become conflated with Devan's *Tuppāriyam Sambu* (*Detective Sambu*), whose illustrated figure the actor uncannily resembles, but Ramani in *Honeymoon Couple* is one of his most reprised and best-beloved characters. Ramani hates to work and spends all of his time trying to get out of it by making up lies and excuses to tell his wife, his boss, his colleagues, his creditors, and anyone else who will listen. Instead of working, he wants to go on a honeymoon. The idea is so crazy that he tells his wife Rukmini that it came to him in a dream.

> Ram: Nothing…Rukku…You asked why I was smiling in my sleep this morning…I dreamt that you and I were going on a honeymoon.
>
> Ruk: You have a daughter who's old enough to be married! Don't you have any shame? [*vekkamāyilla*…] Dreaming about going on a honeymoon!
>
> Ram: Why is that so crazy [*paittiyam*]? It just came to me in a dream.[37]

He goes on to tell her all the details of their dream honeymoon including what they wore while sitting in their air-conditioned room in the cool hill station of Simla eating ice cream.

Although Ramani wants to go on a honeymoon, and argues that this is a perfectly natural desire for a middle-aged man, he still feels the deep-seated cultural pressure against it. Rukmini is mortified by the whole idea, and he is not immune. Even when he first tells his wife about the idea, he says that he feels "embarrassed" *(vekkamā iṟukku)* about it (p. 8). Later, when he is getting excited about the idea and shouting about the new pants and shirt he has bought for his honeymoon, he is shushed by his wife. She says yes, they are going on a honeymoon but that they should do it without noise because

[37] Mohan, "Crazy." *Honeymoon Couple.* [in Tamil] Unpublished manuscript, 1971. Translated by Kristen Rudisill as *Honeymoon Couple* (Unpublished manuscript, 2004), pp. 3-4.

she feels ashamed *(māṉam pōraṛa).*[38] Even though there is plenty of evidence of his own embarrassment on the subject up to this point, Ramani scolds his wife, saying that it's not as if she's eloping, since she's going on honeymoon with her own husband. "What's there to be ashamed about in that? *(Atula eṉṉa avamāṉam?)"* The manager of the Ooty (a hill station west of Chennai and a popular honeymoon spot) bungalow, who does not know that Ramani and Rukmini are "honeymooning," makes it clear that the idea of an older couple on a honeymoon is not just laughable, but actually offensive to the general public. He says that the mind changes with the person and while it may be possible to enjoy a honeymoon at a later age, what would the world say *(But ulakam eṉṉa collum)?* He answers his own question: they would say you were a rascal without modesty *(vekkala keṭṭavan),* a rascal without shame *(māṉala keṭṭavan),* and that you were loose in the head *(lūsu).* In fact, with a daughter of marriageable age "wouldn't they stone you?" *(kallai viṭṭu eṟiya māṭṭāṅka…),* he asks rhetorically.[39] At the very end of the play, Ramani and Rukmini decide to come clean: "[n]ow that everything is revealed, why should we hide just this? We came on honeymoon." The play ends when the raja grabs his chest and screams as if they've given him a heart attack with their confession of honeymooning, but in a replay of an earlier scene, it is only an ant bite.

Jokes and the Comic Traditions of Tamils

Honeymoon Couple is a good example of the hypothesis that although techniques, genres, and certain themes may be cross-cultural, humor is rooted in particular cultural contexts. In his work on humor in Marathi theater from 1970-1990, Mahadev Apte argues that "[w]ithout the shared cultural knowledge and conventions one cannot

[38] Mohan, "Crazy." *Honeymoon Couple.* [in Tamil] Unpublished manuscript, 1971, p. 91.
[39] Mohan 1971, p. 128.

appreciate humor even by oneself, nor can one communicate it to others."[40] There are, of course, different degrees of appreciation, and the relationship between culture and humor can work in both directions. It is possible to understand and appreciate humor after gaining cultural competency, but it is also possible to work from the humor to a deeper understanding of culture. The present analysis of the humor in Tamil plays is like Apte's in that both are designed to offer insights into these particular communities and cultures, and they work because "humor functions as a barometer, albeit a rough one, of what makes a society tick and what its major sociocultural attributes are."[41]

It is made clear in *Honeymoon Couple* that marriages, honeymoons, and babies are appropriate only to the young in the specific world of Tamil culture because people traditionally get married early and have children right away. It is still common to see the family planning slogan that "the marriage age for a girl is twenty-one" on the back of lorries and rickshaws, testifying to the fact that many girls are married younger. It is natural for these young couples to have children, but when Ramani's fifty-year-old co-worker Tanikatchalam announces the birth of his eleventh child, all his workmates all chide him, saying "[d]on't you have any shame? Having babies at age fifty!"[42] Only Ramani supports him, scolding the others: "Che! You are all so conservative. In America they have new marriages at age fifty and go on honeymoons. You are still so old fashioned."[43] This argument, that Americans are progressive and Indians backward, is not particularly effective in conservative Tamil culture, which often criticizes the practices of a corrupt America where young women flirt with boys and dress immodestly

[40] Apte, Mahadev L. *Humor and Communication in Contemporary Marathi Theater: A Sociolinguistic Perspective.* Pune: Linguistic Society of India, 1992, p. 38.
[41] Ibid., p. 14.
[42] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 21.
[43] Ibid., p. 20.

and people marry and go on honeymoons late in life only to get divorced ("die-vorce" as it is pronounced in Tamil). The fears of western cultural imperialism and the spread of these "modern" practices make up a large part of the objections that middle-class Tamils voice about film and television[44] and that sabha dramas refer to in distinguishing themselves and their values from those media.

A honeymoon is designed for a newly-married couple to travel together for a short time in order to get to know each other in every way, including sexually, apart from their families. This is when they establish themselves as a couple, and the characters in this play are obviously uncomfortable with the whole idea. Tamils have not been following the tradition of honeymooning for very long and are very conservative about sex, especially among those who have reached an age where they are no longer trying to have children. There is something shameful and inherently funny, this drama assumes, about a middle-aged man desiring pleasure, and particularly the sexual pleasure associated with the honeymoon. The joke is made explicit in an exchange between Ramani's wife and son, where Rukmini tells her son Dilip that "[t]he son is at an age where he should know what a honeymoon is, but doesn't. The father is at an age where he should forget it." Dilip replies that the "[o]pposite house boy and his wife went on honeymoon and immediately had a baby," prompting his mother to scold him: "[d]on't say that in front of your father or he'll start planning for that also."[45]

These cultural notes help explain Ramani's embarrassment and Rukmini's scoffing at his dreams for romance after twenty years of marriage. He is always saying

[44] See Butcher, Melissa. *Transnational Television, Cultural Identity and Change: When STAR Came to India.* New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 14-15.
[45] Mohan 1971, p. 92.

that he wants to take leave from work so that he can take her to the movies and enjoy life with her.

> Ruk: Isn't there a proper age to enjoy specific things?
>
> Ram: What is all this big deal about age?
>
> Ruk: A big age…That's what I am saying. By this November you will be 45 years old. How much did you desire to go on a honeymoon when you were young and couldn't! But can you go for a honeymoon now? ...
>
> Ram: We can. Definitely we can. I know that the only obstacle to our honeymoon was your father. He's not here now. [46]

Ramani's argument is that if a man can get married later in life, as many do if their first wife dies, why can't he go on a honeymoon? The logic is sound, except that he is proposing a honeymoon with a woman he has been married to for twenty-odd years, not one that he's just married and needs to get away from everyone with in order to get to know.

The jokes and comic themes of these plays can be very revealing about the cultural values of the Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai. The audience response to these performances involves a spontaneity that is absent in classical and religious cultural performances that have pre-scripted responses. Connoisseur audiences of the classical arts are expected to respond to performances in particular ways coded by years of tradition.[47] Although there are cues in the dramas as to what are supposed to be jokes,[48] it is difficult to script comedy. It is possible and in fact common for jokes to fall flat or

[46] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), pp. 18-19.
[47] The *Natyasastra* (200BCE – 200 CE) was the first text to establish connoisseurship. For elaborations of *rasa* theory and details on appropriate responses to various types of performances, see *Grow Long, Blessed Night: Love Poems from Classical India.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; Ingalls, Daniel H. H. *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyakara's "Treasury."* Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1965; Schwartz, Susan L. *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
[48] Usually a pause in the dialogue to allow for the audience's laughter or a musical cue.

lose relevance over time. This is why comedy writer Crazy Mohan believes that the audience must be taken into consideration in this type of performance in particular: "Comedy is the only form of performing arts which is a duet between the audience and the performers—the rest are all solos."[49] When the audiences laugh, when they find intended jokes funny, these performances can offer some insights into the *actual,* not idealized, anxieties, concerns, and self-conceptions of this elite community of observers.

Even S. Ve. Shekher, who deliberately tries to appeal more broadly than other troupes, having fans of both lower castes and younger audiences, still roots his plays in a specific audience base. In an interview with S. Gopalie, former producer of Doordarshan's drama section, he said,

> I do not have much belief or faith in some groups, calling themselves special, doing plays that were hits in Broadway or London. I must do a play, say to a Mylapore audience, focusing on the Mylaporean problems. Where is the need to project to my people somebody else's problem? There is little point in it.[50]

The typical Mylaporean audience has a fixed identity that allows him to say this and to target them in his work.

Sabha plays are often dismissed as "just comedy" by the very same people who are both parodied in them and patronize them. It is interesting to note that this contradictory attitude toward a favored entertainment genre is not just found in the elite sabha viewing community, but is also prevalent among village audiences. Susan Seizer reports having heard the same trope that I did many times in the context of her research on the folk theater genre of Special Drama. When she asked about the story of one of the comedic scenes, she was

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[49] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Hooked on Humour: Is Comedy in Theatre Seeing a Resurgence?" *The Hindu.* September 8, 2003.
[50] Gopalie, S. "Metro Amateur Theatre (1965-1985): A Project Report." Senior Fellowship of Cultural Ministry, 2002, p. 229.

> invariably informed, by audience and artist alike, that 'there is no story here, this is just *comedy*!' (ingu kathaiyē illai, kāmeṭi tān!). *It was as though drama and comedy were antithetical terms.* 'Just comedy' meant that such performances have no touch with the more esteemed realm of the written story, verse, plot, or narrative.[51]

The juxtaposition of the serious and the comedic found in Special Drama is, in fact, a device found in ancient Sanskrit dramas and often in Tamil films. The comedy here runs on a separate "comedy track" secondary to the main drama and characters. Comic episodes will be inserted into the main drama, marked by characters of lower status that use a lower variety of language. Thus the audience gets both drama *and* comedy in the space of a single performance.[52] The distinction, however, seems to be lessening and performances leaning more toward the comic. During her research in 1992-3, Seizer found that 42% of Special Drama performance consisted of different mythological and historical dramas, but 55% were of *Valli's Wedding,* a play Seizer describes as "essentially a comedy."[53] The remaining 3%

> were for an event of 'pure comedy' conducted in a vein of social farce known as *Kathambam….* Performances so named consist solely of comedic scenes, performed by multiple sets of Buffoons and Dancers, with no roles for heroic actors. 'Kathambam' is an apt term to name what is perceived as a messily tantalizing excess of comedy—one that audiences clearly appreciate, even if no one else does (or will admit they do).[54]

These increasingly popular *Kathambam* performances are much closer to what happens in a sabha drama which, after all, is "just comedy."

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[51] Seizer Susan. S*tigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005, p. 203, emphasis mine.
[52] On Sanskrit drama see Baumer, Rachel Van M., and James R. Brandon, eds. *Sanskrit Drama in Performance.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981. Modern playwrights have also copied this device resulting in such dramas as Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq.* Unlike the Parsi theater model of "shallow" and "deep" scenes that Girish Karnad used in his 1964 play *Tughlaq,* the comedic (shallow) scenes of Special Drama interrupt the narrative, rather than link the serious (deep) scenes together (see Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 7ff.).
[53] Seizer 2005, p. 129.
[54] Ibid., p. 130.

In the full-length comedy plays sponsored by elite urban sabhas, every scene includes jokes and comic characters as well as colloquial language. The "salient features" of sabha dramas, which have little literary merit according to K. S. Rajendran, are "contrived plots, unnatural developments, thrills and suspenses, hilarious comedies."[55] There is a parallel phenomenon of "serious" sabha dramas, which are rarely lightened with any humor at all, but these are rare, poorly attended, and often outdated. I expect that they are supported by sabhas not to earn money or to cater to audience predilections, but rather as part of a regional nationalistic effort to encourage Tamil language and promote artists who work on dramas in that language that address serious social reform issues. The serious/comedy contrast in the sabhas needs to be drawn not within the plays themselves but between dramas and performances such as classical music and dance.

Chennai's urban audiences have revealed a preference for comedy over serious drama, whether in Tamil or in English, on stage or on screen. In an article titled "Hooked on Humour," journalist Kausalya Santhanam writes that "[f]or quite a few years now, the monopoly of success on the Tamil stage has been that of the experts with the appealing pun,"[56] and a large percentage of the experts she names (S. Ve. Shekher, Crazy Mohan, Cho Ramasamy, Kathadi Ramamurthy, Mouli, Nagesh, Thangavelu, Bosskey,[57] the United Amateur Artists) are from the sabha theater. Tamils are incredibly proud of their language play, and those who master it are much appreciated. Santhanam, a Tamil herself, says without reservation that

[55] Rajendran 1989, pp. 159-60.
[56] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* September 8, 2003.
[57] Lead comedian of Hari Giri Theaters, whose play "Oho" was quite popular at the time Santhanam's article was published.

> Tamil Nadu has some of the best comedians/ennes in the country. For, this is a city where even the cab driver and the rickshaw man are masters of the ready quip and the instant retort. The Tamil people have a talent for the right word.[58]

The paradox is that although most Tamils agree with this self-aggrandizing representation of themselves as funny, they will also decry the sabha comedies with the derogatory slur "just comedy."

Santhanam's article is interesting because although she respects comic traditions in Tamil and understands the hard work behind them,[59] from her other work it is clear that she has nothing good to say about the sabha dramas. She believes that today's comedies rely too much on recycled jokes and have little to offer the "discerning viewer."[60] Performers are more concerned about offending or insulting the audience than they are about challenging or engaging them, and this contributes to the repetition of tried and true jokes and themes. Comedian S. Ve. Shekher, in a disclaimer meant to compliment viewers, told Santhanam that "[t]hose who come to view plays are well educated. So even in a socio-political satire…I only give my opinion."[61] The resulting conservative reliance on the familiar is the same as in the commercial cinema that this performance genre attempts to distinguish itself from, but the rhetoric and motivation are different. Shekher is worried that audiences will be engaged with the performance and feel offended or insulted; the typical mass media fear is that audiences will become passive absorbers and imitators of what they see on screen.[62]

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[58] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* September 8, 2003.
[59] "Comedy is hard work. A good director must have a sense of humour apart from being able to hold the balance so that it does not become mere hamming." Santhanam, *The Hindu,* September 8, 2003.
[60] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Outdated Ideas, Antiquated Scenes." *The Hindu.* January 24, 2003.
[61] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* September 8, 2003.
[62] See Gans, Herbert J. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste.* Revised and updated edition. New York: Basic Books, 1999 for an in-depth discussion of the primary critiques of popular culture.

The actual response of intellectuals to these "safe," formulaic sabha plays is, as exemplified by Santhanam, *The Hindu*'s primary drama critic, to be bored. Santhanam rarely reviews any of the comedies, from which she can not expect any innovation, preferring to attend and review the few serious dramas staged. She is continually disappointed by the lack of originality even here, however, and expressed her boredom with the serious plays in a 2003 article titled "Outdated Ideas, Antiquated Scenes":

> In various permutations and combinations, this theme is played out again and again in mainstream Tamil theatre. The conflict in familiar relationships—between father and son, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law and among brothers. And of course the Montague-Capulet like feud between the families of two young people in love. The situations are developed through the clashes and misunderstandings that take place. But invariably everything turns out right in the end. Copious tears of regret are shed with the patriarch of the family, who is usually considered infallible, flashing forgiving smiles or delivering a long speech on the need for togetherness and understanding.[63]

Other intellectuals in the city agree with her assessment and thus either avoid the stage altogether or attend the English-language comedies (usually Indianized adaptations of western plays), which are growing in frequency and popularity, or foreign comedies translated into Tamil.

The problem of staleness in the arts is one that has a long history with regard to Tamil culture, even extending to classical music. While for the most part, this is a genre valued for its adherence to tradition, the famous nationalist poet Bharatiyar wrote an essay in 1916 in which he said that the Tamils had lost their feeling for music:

> Go to any district, any village,…whichever vidwan comes, it will be the same story. Because Tamilians have iron ears, they can stand to listen to the same seven or eight songs over and over and over and over again. In places where people have ears of flesh they would not endure such a thing (213).[64]

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[63] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Outdated Ideas, Antiquated Scenes." In *The Hindu,* January 24, 2003.
[64] Quoted in Weidman, Amanda J. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 174.

This complaint is echoed by today's Tamils when they discuss sabha dramas. Part of the reason the Chennai audiences have stopped paying attention to Crazy Mohan, informants tell me, is that although he claims never to repeat a joke, there are many repetitious instances. Having seen many of his plays, written for Crazy Creations and other troupes, I sympathize with the criticism that Crazy Mohan's plays are "formulaic." Tired jokes that Chennai audiences hear every week can all seem new and exciting to audiences in the U.S., who only have the opportunity to see his plays once every few years.

This accusation of unchanging formula has also been a common criticism of Indian films. The label of "formulaic" is applied to commercial cinema in India, but the intents of the film and sabha drama formulas are diametrically opposite. The cinema formula is aimed at appealing to broader audiences, while the theater formula of a loose love story strung together with jokes targets a very small segment of the population in the city. Films are crowded with music, dance, and fight scenes, elements that are included primarily to appeal across generations, classes, and regions. Sabha theater, on the other hand, is generally designed to appeal to a particular Chennai-identified Brahmin community that prides itself on intellectualism and eschews most of the signature "masala" elements of commercial film. Actor A. R. Srinivasan told me in an interview that the professional theater was in the same style as film, with songs and everything. The amateur theater that he counted himself part of as an early member of the United Amateur Artists, wanted to distinguish themselves from the professional theater and film worlds, and one strategy was to remove all the elaborate costumes and sets as well as the music.[65] Non-brahmin painter V. Santhanam's dismissal of the theatrical genre on the

[65] My interview with A. R. Srinivasan, May 14, 2004.

basis that it is a Brahmin genre[66] is echoed by other critics, middle-class people, and intellectuals such as Kausalya Santhanam who once asked T. S. Sridhar (a. k. a. Marina) whether his plays "cater[ed] to a niche Brahmin audience that belonged to a certain class and section of society."[67] Marina denied it, saying that "[a]n artiste has no caste," but it is clear that the few audience members and fans who value these plays are almost exclusively from the small community Santhanam indicated. The cultural commentary in the plays and their relevance to an educated, middle-class audience both in India and the diaspora provide ample proof of the importance of the plays to this community. The dedication of many artists and enthusiasts may not lead to a revival, but certainly to a continuation of live theater in Chennai.

There are many joke themes that recur in the sabha plays over and over, thus offering a glimpse into what makes Tamil Brahmin audiences laugh. Most of them are present in "Honeymoon Couple" in one form or another, and it is useful in thinking about both the genre and the community that produces and views it to take an in-depth look at a few of Tamil theater's most popular jokes. Audiences never seem to tire of them, and still go to the theater to enjoy Kathadi Ramamurthy's play, more than thirty years after it was first inaugurated.

One recurring theme has to do with confusion about people's names. Naming is incredibly important in Tamil culture and can mark a person's religion, community, generation, and linguistic affiliation. Central to *Honeymoon Couple* is a joke about how confusing it can be when people have the same name and one person is mistaken for someone completely different. Ramani's best friend at the office is named Rahottaman

[66] My interview with V. Santhanam and A. Viswam, March 8, 2004.
[67] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Life Painted With Wit and Humour." *The Hindu.* April 16, 2004.

and it just so happens that there is a very rich Maharaja who also lives in their neighborhood whose name is often shortened to Rahottaman. The Maharaja Rahottaman owns a bungalow in Ooty and has a P. A. (Personal Assistant) named, guess what, Ramani.

This theme of confusion overlaps in this instance with jokes about doctors and anxieties about their incompetence and the effects it can have on people's lives.[68] When Ramani sends his friend Rahottaman to pick up his heart x-rays from the lab, he is given Maharaja Rahottaman's x-rays to take to the doctor. The Maharaja has serious heart problems and after seeing the x-ray the doctor fears for Ramani's life, telling his family to do anything he wants, or his heart may give out. This is why Rukmini finally agrees to go to Ooty on a "honeymoon." The Maharaja's P. A., on the other hand, is given Ramani's x-rays at the lab and the confused doctor thinks there's been some kind of miracle.

Doctor jokes are always popular, and the doctor's office is the second most popular set in the sabha repertoire, right after the living room. Doctors are supposed to be the most educated people around, and the public trusts them with their health. The joke is usually about incompetent doctors, who have patients because of family connections or other non-merit-based reasons. There is an extended joke in *Honeymoon Couple* when we first meet the doctor, who has been informed that a patient has a pain in his mid-section. The doctor gets very excited about doing an "operation" to check it out

[68] Crazy Mohan in particular is also fond of jokes about people with disabilities. His plays often include characters that are hard of hearing, have poor eyesight, or some other affliction that he can exploit to humorous effect. There are at least two instances of this in *Honeymoon Couple*. First, Ramani tells the story about how he married his wife Rukmini after his cross-eyed friend delivered his love letters to the Rukmini who lived in the house diagonally across from his instead of the one who lived directly across the street. Second, Ramani's work colleague Tanikatchalam has a stutter that Crazy Mohan shamelessly exploits for its humorous potential.

since it has been awhile since he had the opportunity to operate. When the patient asks if he knows how to do this type of appendix operation, this dialogue ensues:

> Dr.: Do I know? What is there to know? This is how you learn. Last year I did an appendix operation of this type on a patient. I forgot and cut his throat instead of his stomach.
>
> Ram: Ayyo…
>
> Dr.: But see my luck: that guy had developed some growth in his throat and hadn't said anything to me. So I quickly cut away that flesh.
>
> Ram: Tell me the tonsil operation was successful…
>
> Dr.: Why did you go and ask me that? That flesh that I cut away turned out to be that fellow's tongue. How's that?[69]

Similarly, Cho Ramasamy's *Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai* opens with an extended joke about how the doctor left a needle inside one of his patients after a stomach operation. Both of these examples exploit people's anxieties about the motivations of doctors, who make a living only when people are sick. They play on the fear that doctors actually *want* people to be sick and not get well so that they will have business and make money.

A second theme that is important to this community involves anxiety about money. The viewers of sabha theater almost without exception would say they were "middle class," a category that Sanjay Joshi argues is "primarily a project of self-fashioning."[70] This self-designation, as argued by Purnima Mankekar and Sara Dickey (2000b), is largely dependent upon appearances and possessions. In order to keep up appearances, therefore, many "middle class" Tamils will cut corners in private, and if they are caught they will be exposed as "misers" in a community where generosity has

[69] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 10.
[70] Joshi 2001, p. 2.

always been a commendable trait.[71] Ramani and Rukmini are certainly in a precarious financial position, and Rukmini, as the realist in the family, is constantly worrying about money. How will they pay for their bills, take care of Dilip's college tuition and fees, and find Nandini a good husband if Ramani doesn't have a reliable salary?

Tamil Brahmins make fun of misers, but respect those who opulently display wealth through physical possessions.[72] Ramani cannot seem to get this right and goes into a great deal of debt over expensive imported toiletries that not even his wife sees. The shopkeeper exposes Ramani's unpaid purchases to his wife and they include

> Chet: Colgate Toothpaste—one dozen…
>
> Ruk: One dozen toothpastes?
>
> Chet: Listen: Toothpaste: one dozen, giant size. He is the tooth-brushing demon. I have seen people destroyed by drinking…I've seen people destroyed by gambling. But *your* husband will be destroyed by brushing his teeth.[73]

These toiletries are considered luxuries, and Ramani is buying them in excessive amounts. The funny thing is, however, that they are not *visible* luxuries. A large part of middle-class identity has to do with having things that people will *see* in your house that mark you as being of a certain status. As Thorstein Veblen pointed out, in late nineteenth-century America, this "conspicuous consumption" is actually more important in the urban setting than the rural because in the rural setting everyone is already aware of each individual's economic status, whereas in the urban setting the respect that comes

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[71] See *Poems of Love and War: From the Eight Anthologies and the Ten Long Poems of Classical Tamil.* Selected and translated by A. K. Ramanujan. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 291-2 on excessive gift-giving as a virtue of Sangam-period kings.

[72] A good example is Purnam Viswanathan's *Undersecretary,* which is discussed in chapter six. This is also evident in the fantasies of cinema. Peter Manuel wrote that in films "it is not the poor that are celebrated, but rather synthetic, urban, Westernized luxury. In this sense the films can be seen as responses to a mass desire for escapism, and as reflections of the ideology of the affluent corporate producers" (Manuel, Peter. "Popular Music in India 1901-1986." *Popular Music* 7, no. 2 (May 1988): 157-176, p. 160).

[73] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 15.

with wealth is often based on the perceptions of strangers.[74] This is the reason that people in Chennai, as in other Indian cities, will go into debt over television sets, refrigerators, and other expensive appliances. Ramani's bulk purchases of toothpaste, soaps, powders, creams, and razor blades are hidden away even from his *wife,* however, making him an object of ridicule, not respect.

In his defense, Ramani laughs at "misers" like his friend Rahottaman. Many Indians struggle to maintain their middle-class status by saving money wherever they can. They laugh at this tendency in the humorous character of the despised miser. Generosity is one of the greatest Tamil virtues, even going back to the characteristics of the ancient Tamil kings. Ramani says of Rahottaman that

> [h]e's a bit of a miser. He isn't fit for enjoying life…If Rahottaman goes out somewhere and leaves the house, his son will be inside the house. If the son goes out, Rahottaman stays home. Why? Why? Because for the two men in that house, there is only a single veshti.[75]

Language

Jokes and dramatic themes are one window into the self-identity of the Tamil Brahmin community; language is another. While Dravidian politicians were agitating against Hindi and Sanskrit, these Brahmins were writing and enjoying plays in *Tamil.* The Tamil that was predominantly used, and still is by many troupes, is marked by the Brahmin dialect. Cho Ramasamy, Marina, and Crazy Mohan, for example, all use this distinctive Sanskritized dialect which reaffirms the identity of this community as simultaneously Tamil *and* Brahmin. The speech in these plays is, as Arokianathan claims of radio plays in general, "normal day-to-day speech forms…'recreated' in a controlled

[74] Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institution* with introduction by C. Wright Mills (NYC: Mentor Books, 1953). Original 1899, p. 72.
[75] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 16.

environment."[76] This familiar, nostalgic language, in fact, is one reason why many diasporic Tamil Brahmins say that they prefer Crazy Mohan over the more broadly popular S. Ve. Shekher. These plays, complete with Brahmin dialect speech and jokes that turn on knowledge of English or Hindi, tend to be family or social comedies with characters that are stereotypically from this target community. The plays may have little to do with making the members of the audience more "cultured," but many of the jokes *assume* a certain level of education and cultural competence, including knowledge of English (and often Hindi and Telugu), current events, and classical performance arts as well as mass media.

S. Ve. Shekher, with his keen business sense, realized that Brahmin dialect and subject matter would severely limit his audiences and so made a point of speaking everyday Madras Tamil and keeping the themes and families in his plays as generic as possible. Although he himself is Brahmin and proud of it, S.Ve. Shekher understands that the population of Tamil Brahmins who enjoy theater is not large enough to sustain a troupe and has spoken many times about the insular way other troupes use Brahmin dialect and culture in their plays. Marina, in response to criticism of this kind, said defensively that "[t]here is nothing wrong with people using the language that they are familiar with and writing about the society they know."[77]

By extension, these troupes also tend to hire actors and actresses that they know from their own community. They find actors simply through family, co-workers, and friends, who are part of the same social circles as themselves and their audience

[76] Arokianathan, S. *Language Use in Mass Media*. New Delhi: Creative Publishers, 1988, p. 2.
[77] In interview with M. V. Sudakar (Sudakar, M. V. *Marinavin Natakankal.* ("The Dramas of Marina") Chennai: Puram Publications, 1981, p. 91. My translation.

members. Fittingly, these troupes often refer to themselves as "family."[78] Shekher, in contrast, employs non-Brahmins in his troupe, approaching good performers whom he has seen in other troupes or on television and inviting them to join his troupe. His actors are rarely permitted to perform with other troupes,[79] though they are free to do television and film roles, provided they don't interfere with show times and rehearsals. Their success in the mass media brings only more recognition and publicity to his stage troupe.

Tamil language theater, like the Marathi language theater that Apte discussed, demonstrates ethnocentrism and the pride in language and culture that both Tamils and Marathis are famous for.[80] Given the fact that sabha theater is entirely a Tamil language theater, and that this characteristic is central to the genre and therefore to the identity of the writers, performers, and viewers, why the English title *Honeymoon Couple*? There was a very popular trend for a while of using English titles for Tamil plays, and this was one of them. Other examples are *Madras By Night, If I Get It, Lights On, One More Exorcist,* and *Flight 172*. When asked about his practice of titling plays in English, Cho Ramasamy responded by saying

> I did a number of plays and for some reasons I can't recall now why I gave the titles in English. T. K. Shanmugam, a reputed professional, was so annoyed with my titles in English for Tamil plays, and made public comments when he presided over one of our plays. I promised him my next play would not bear an English title. He looked pleased. I called it "Quo Vadis."[81]

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[78] This is especially true of Crazy Creations. The writer (Crazy Mohan) and the lead male actor (Crazy Balaji) are actually brothers, and they refer to the troupe (Crazy Creations) and their closest fans and supporters as the "Crazy Family."

[79] I only know one instance where a Natakapriya troupe member was allowed to perform with another troupe: Soundriya performed with Rail Priya for their tenth anniversary performance.

[80] See Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997 on Tamil and Deshpande, Prachi. "Narratives of Pride: History and Regional Identity in Maharashtra, India c. 1870-1960." Ph.D. diss., Tufts University, 2002. on Marathi.

[81] Gopalie 2002, p. 53.

It is easy to see the source of T. K. Shanmugam's annoyance with this trend. This was a period of intense Tamil pride that came with the rise of the Dravidian movement. Why disguise Tamil literature with an English title, thus masking its true glory?

Middle-class urbanites have a conflicted relationship with the English language. English is a marker of education, class, and wealth in India, thus the English titles introduce an element of snobbery onto the stage. However, just because something is in English doesn't mean it automatically confers status on the viewers. In fact, several of the academic articles that refer to sabha theater (Ramanujam 2003, Arakappan 1999) focus on this trend, implying that having English titles for Tamil plays is misleading and somehow dishonest.

The two major political parties in Tamilnadu are both regional parties that often campaign on Tamil nationalist issues. Cho Ramasamy, a playwright whose work will be discussed in detail in chapter seven, wrote a play called *Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai* (*The Scriptures Don't Say So*) that includes the character of a politician, who educates his son in English-medium schools. He claims that he made a "sacrifice" (*tiyākam*) in terms of his career and reputation by doing so:

> No matter what the others were saying I sent him to study in English medium. All the politicians from other parties said, "[h]e talks "Tamil, Tamil" on the platform, but sends his son to study English medium. But did I worry? If he had studied Tamil medium what would his fate be? This is a sacrifice I made, is it not?[82]

This character parodies Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi, a celebrated Tamil writer and orator who lobbied for Tamil education but educated all of his own children in English-medium schools, then sent them abroad for college.[83]

[82]Ramasamy, Cho. *Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai.* Madras: Alliance, 1995., p. 38. My translation.
[83] Discussion with Pritham Chakravarthy, 2004.

The English also introduces an element of pretension, which does not command respect and is always a good source of humor. In his 1969 Tamil adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion,* Cho Ramasamy explained the place of English in middle-class India through a conversation between Marudhayi (the vegetable seller trying to raise her social status by learning to behave like a middle-class girl) and Gopinath (her teacher). Marudhayi is nervous about the party Gopinath is throwing, where she will be expected to pass as a London-educated doctor, because she doesn't speak any English. Gopinath reassures her with this speech:

> Gopi: How many modern girls can speak English to a person without mistakes? If you know four phrases in English, that is enough—only four phrases! You can manage if you can remember them when moving around high-class people.
>
> Maru: Four phrases?
>
> Gopi: Yes: Thank you; I am sorry; How nice; How lovely.
>
> Maru: Is that all?
>
> Gopi: But one more thing you need to remember: before saying all these phrases, you need to make the sound, "Oh!" Modern girls' knowledge of English is only this much. Oh! Thank you!; Oh! I am sorry!; Oh! How nice!; Oh! How lovely!—That's all.
>
> Maru: What if I suddenly forget all four?
>
> Gopi: Not to fear! "Oh!" by itself is enough—if you go to a party that's all you need to know! Half the time these women will just shout, "Oh! Oh!" In truth, you don't need even that. Whatever they say, you just need to smile, and that is enough. A modern girl! It is enough to show your teeth. In this society, many high-class people will show their teeth.
>
> Maru: I don't understand anything.[84]

Cho never answered the unspoken charges of T. K. Shanmugam, simply writing off his English titles as insignificant. As opposed to this allegedly careless titling, the English is

[84] Ramasamy, Cho. *Maṉam Oru Kuraṅku.* Madras: Alliance, 1997. Translated by Kristen Rudisill as *The Mind is a Monkey* (Unpublished manuscript, 2002), p. 30.

much more essential to the humor in *Honeymoon Couple*, where "honeymoon" is not just a foreign word but also a foreign cultural concept.

The blending of languages and cultures provides for a lot of humor in Tamil sabha theater. Language jokes are the most popular type of Tamil joke according to Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, who analyzed verbal Tamil humor that had been "gathered in written form," including jokes and cartoons from magazines, comedies, folk stories, and humorous literature, and categorized them thematically.[85] They come in all varieties, but the sabha comedies are particularly fond of what are called "code-mixing" jokes that blend two languages and require competency in both. The second language is usually English, but occasionally it is Hindi or Telugu. All the language jokes say something about this audience. The Tamil ones reiterate the fact that they are *Tamils* above all else, and proud of it. The code mixing ones say that they are cosmopolitan and multi-lingual. One code-mixing joke that audiences find particularly funny in *Honeymoon Couple* and that is also directly related to the honeymoon concept is as follows. Ramani is trying to convince Rukmini to go on a honeymoon with him. He is getting very adamant and annoying, and finally she snaps and retorts, "[I]t's okay. Go on a honeymoon if you want to, but I'm not coming." To which he responds, "[d]on't you know anything? If I go alone that's not a 'honey' moon but a 'ta<u>n</u>i' moon.[86] *Ta<u>n</u>i* means "alone" in Tamil and also happens to rhyme with "honey," making the joke funny on several levels. First is the cultural concept of a honeymoon, which has nothing to do with the literal meaning of the

[85] See Ferro-Luzzi, Gabriella Eichinger. *The Taste of Laughter: Aspects of Tamil Humour.* Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992. After language and logic jokes, some of her categories are husband and wife, courtship and marriage arrangement, elders and children, in-laws, food, school, medicine, law and order, the beggar, economy, technology, politics, and cinema. This general typology remains valid for the present study of sabha comedy dramas.
[86] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 19.

word. It implies a trip taken by a newly married *couple.* It is, by definition, not something that one does alone, so if Ramani were to go by himself, as Rukmini suggests, the trip would take on a completely different connotation. Second, the rhyme is clever and creates slippage between the two concepts of "honey" and "tani" which are set up as opposites although they are not. It also allows the two languages to blend together in a way that sounds natural to the ear and requires the listener to pay attention in order to catch the joke.

The Amateur Aesthetic

The sabha theater relies heavily on dialogue and jokes for its appeal, but there are occasionally audio and visual components to the plays that can add significantly to the humorous effect. These can include costumes, gesture, sets, music, and physical comedy.[87] The plays are designed to be fast-paced and elicit quick laughs from the audience. The structure and aesthetic of the performances are based on the premise that both performers and audiences are working people who participate in the occasional drama for fun. Instead of lasting all night like most folk dramas, sabha performances (of dance, drama, or music) are limited to the approximately two hours between when people could reasonably arrive after work and when they need to get home to bed (usually between 7 and 9 P. M.). This performance length also holds on weekends, when people could sleep in or attend a matinee.

The general aesthetic of sabha dramas is about speed and convenience. When the actors work all day in an office (usually for a bank, the railways, or a large corporation),

[87] Sivathamby comments on the centrality of "abhinaya" or gesture to Tamil theater, but this doesn't really apply to sabha theater. (Sivathamby, K. *Drama in Ancient Tamil Society*. Madras: New Century Book House, Private, Limited, 1981, p. 404.)

it is difficult for them to spend a lot of time rehearsing, applying makeup, or dressing in elaborate costumes. This distinguishes them from most genres of professional and folk theater in India. Kathakali, in nearby Kerala, for example, requires several years of rigorous training in expression, dance, gesture, and martial arts before an actor is ready to perform in public. The make-up and costume requirements for a single performance may take several hours of preparation.[88] Rajendran has suggested that sabha actors/actresses "all learnt how to act by watching films,"[89] but they certainly also learn by watching each other and by doing.

Most sabha dramas concern the lives of everyday families, and thus allow for quotidian language and costumes. M. Tangarasu remarked derogatorily that one of the conveniences of sabha theater is that people can rush straight from the office and onto the stage in the evening. This is part of what distinguishes this type of theater and these actors from "professionals" who need to earn their living on stage. The "costumes" say very clearly that acting is something these people do as a hobby, not a profession. The actors are dressed as everyday members of a family, with the men in pants and shirts, veshtis, and the occasional lungi. The women mostly wear saris or salwar kameez, with the occasional nightdress or more modern jeans and a shirt. For the most part, the characters of sabha plays are ordinary folk and they dress in ordinary clothes.

There are some exceptions, usually in plays that are set in mythological or historical times or involve time travel to either the past or the future (for example, *Kātula*

[88] See Phillip Zarrilli's work ("Kathakali." In *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance,* edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, 315-357. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990; *The Kathakali Complex: Actor, Performance, and Structure.* New Delhi: Abhinav, 1984; *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play.* London Routledge, 2000) for more information on Kathakali.
[89] Rajendran 1989, p. 158.

Pū, Mahābhārtattil Maṅkāttā, Crazy Kishkinda). Particular characters, especially film stars and priests, also have special costumes that can be funny. Additionally, there are often characters that are in disguise for one reason or another, and these costumes can be ridiculous and funny. The most common disguises include large moustaches and men in drag. An example of a specialized costume from *Honeymoon Couple* is that of the raja character, whose outfit is complete with ludicrously large jewels and a silly crown/turban. People laugh every time the raja makes an appearance not only because of his costume but also because of his entrance. His personal assistant Ramani decided that the raja needed to be announced, so hired his talentless out-of-work cousin to head an orchestra that is assigned to march in front of the raja and play (very badly) music. After the song, Ramani announces the raja using his full and very long name. He tries to do this all in one breath and always runs out of steam before he gets to the end of the name.

The acting style, like the costumes and the language, contributes to the quotidian aesthetic of sabha theater. There is no elaborate training required for actors, who can go from no acting experience to rehearsing casually a few times, to performing on stage. Their rehearsals do not involve any practice of acting techniques or voice projection, the way most professional theater productions would. They learn new plays from written scripts,[90] but if it is a revival of an older play they will often use audio recordings of previous productions. In the latter case, there are usually only a few troupe members who are new and were not part of the previous production. Farley Richmond described the sabha acting style as "realistic acting" with a "melodramatic tendency."[91] Like America's popular TV sitcoms, Tamil sabha plays show the interactions of an everyday

[90] Since most plays are not published, many actors write out their individual parts in notebooks. I noticed at a Viveka Fine Arts rehearsal that many actors brought copies of the published book to refer to.
[91] Richmond 1990, p. 415.

family in which viewers can recognize themselves. These fictional families are, however, funnier, exaggerated versions of the everyday who often become involved in situations that are ludicrous, yet barely believable with an elaborate set up of lies and coincidences.

Realistic acting style is only one of the many similarities between the sabha dramas and the "parallel," or art, cinema movement, which ran from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, reaching its peak in the 1970s.[92] The genre began in the late 1960s, when a few filmmakers began to introduce an alternative for educated viewers. Also at this time, the government Film Finance Corporation (founded in 1960) began to provide a low-interest lending service for the production of "quality" films as part of a push "to establish a 'new tradition' of filmmaking in India, one in which 'authenticity' and 'realism' were key terms."[93] These filmmakers wanted to work outside of the structures of the decadent Bombay film industry and particularly to move away from the stars, songs, and dances of the more commercial genre. These 'realistic' films did well in international film festivals and brought recognition to the Indian film industry that was not there before.

Like the sabha dramas, Sumita Chakravarty describes the parallel film movement as having "petered out" by the mid-1980s, coinciding with the broadcasting of the television serial *Hum Log* and the rise of Doordarshan. The parallel cinema, the early television serials, and the sabha dramas all focused on dialogue (not action or song and dance), had very slow tempos and low budgets, which translated into low technical quality.

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[92] Chakravarty, Sumita S. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-1987.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 235-6.
[93] Ibid., p. 236

The sabha theater shares an acting style and a period of popularity with the parallel film movement, but it shares with commercial cinema the disdain of the elite and a designation as pure escapist entertainment. Even the government has not taken the commercial film industry seriously: "By and large, the cultural policies of the Indian state have been largely dismissive of the impact and influence of commercial cinema,"[94] viewing it as a source of money and corruption.[95] Likewise, when government bodies such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi and the Iyal Isai Nataka Mantram distribute awards for Tamil dramas, the entertainment-focused sabha comedies are rarely recipients.

The sets in sabha dramas are very uniform. All of the troupes rent their sets from the same two designers,[96] so the same generic living room will be seen at different plays by different troupes. It usually consists of a painted backdrop with a door to the back and possibly a window. The troupes decorate the walls differently with posters of deities and plastic flowers, but there is not much that is distinctive about the sets. It costs about six hundred rupees to rent a set for an evening performance. They will put two plastic chairs in the center of the stage and occasionally a small table with a phone. Some troupes (Stage Creations and Natakapriya are good examples) will special-order painted curtains to use as backdrops.[97] Again, these will be used in different plays to represent a garden, a bus stop, or another location. The most popular set after the living room is the doctor's office. This set usually uses the same setting as the living room, but with a change of

[94] Naregal, Veena. "The Fight for Turf and the Crisis of Ideology: Broadcasting Reform and Contemporary Media Distribution in India." In *Rethinking Indian Political Institutions,* edited by Crispin Bates and Subho Basu, 64-82. London: Anthem Press, 2005, p. 159.
[95] The lessons of the southern states, especially Tamilnadu and Andhra Pradesh where famous movie stars were able to gain political power through the film medium, have not been lost on the country, but instead of giving prestige and respect to the film industry have contributed to the perception of the "masses" as gullible and undiscerning.
[96] Padma Stages and Kumar Stage are the primary ones.
[97] S. Ve. Shekher told me that it costs about 4,000 rupees to commission an artist to paint one of these curtains.

furniture. The doctor has a desk with one chair behind it for him to sit in and one chair beside it for the patients. Other common sets include a road or park, a police station, and a temple.

As far as lighting goes, the amateur theater uses only focus lights. A. R. Srinivasan told me that they only light the stage from the front because they do not have enough lights to do more. He told me that early on the United Amateur Artists attempted different lighting, but it would create problems with their sets because the measurements of the different theaters were so different.[98] So now the sabha plays are only front lit, and the stage is full of shadows.

Women on Stage

The stigma of women performing on stage was one that affected both the film and stage industries. The connection between film and live theater was very close when the genre of the full-length Tamil comedy play started in the 1950s. Famous film stars drew audiences to the theater where fans were excited to see them perform live, and theater actors, directors, and plays moved into the film world. Films are much more widely disseminated among more varied publics than sabha plays, and in its early days one of the claims to purity that this Brahmin-dominated theater had over film was the absence of actresses. Despite a stigma against actresses due to an association of prostitution with the performing arts,[99] they were common in films at least since D. G. Phalke cast his daughter Mrnalini in the role of Krishna in his 1919 production of Kaliya Mardan.

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[98]My interview with A. R. Srinivasan, May 14, 2004.

[99] This is very well documented. For examples, see Jordan, Kay K. *From Sacred Servant to Profane Prostitute: A History of the Changing Legal Status of the Devadasis in India, 1857-1947.* New Delhi: Manohar, 2003; Gaston, Anne-Marie. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre.* New Delhi: Manohar, 1996; Hansen, Kathryn. *Grounds for Play: The Nautanki Theatre of North India.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992; Susan Seizer 2005.

The reluctance of women to perform on stage in front of actual male audience members lasted much longer in theater than in the film medium. S. Ve. Shekher argues that theater is actually safer for women's reputations than film or television because it is easy to quit and there are no recordings,[100] but few see it this way. Another factor adding to the delay of female stage actresses was that the families of these respectable young men did not want their sons to be in contact with corrupting actresses, as both Mouli and R. Neelakanthan informed me in interviews. Neelu told me that there was a time when Viveka Fine Arts was the only troupe that did not allow ladies to participate, but would use the two best-looking men for these female roles. They chose to do this because they were afraid of their families' reactions and didn't want the stigma. People thought that boys might get spoiled if they were working with lady artistes.[101] Male artistes such as Cho Ramasamy and Karur Rangarajan played the women's roles in the 1950s and 60s, a trend that lasted until the early 1980s for the especially orthodox. Actor S. Ve. Shekher shared an anecdote about a performance in the early 1980s, when

> *Kumudam,* a Tamil weekly, wanted us to perform in their campus for their employees. It was on a big condition that no lady should participate in the play. We agreed. We asked one of our boys in the group to do the lady's role. The play went off very well.[102]

It is true, however, that this same orthodox Brahmin community allowed their daughters to learn and perform the classical dance Bharata Natyam on stage, but usually only as amateurs. Practitioners of this art could also claim to be preserving a valuable aspect of authentic Indian (Tamil) culture, unlike stage actresses of the very recent performance genre of sabha theater.

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[100] My interview, July 8, 2003.
[101] My interview with R. Neelakanthan, October 29, 2003.
[102] Gopalie 2002, pp. 220-1

There are still very few female actresses in the sabha circuit, and that has been one of the biggest challenges of that genre over the years. Female sabha theater performers, unlike the men, are often professionals, and are therefore better compensated than their male counterparts.[103] They are still paid far better in television or film than theater, and S. Ve. Shekher commented that if their names are going to be spoiled by acting they will usually decide to take the higher paying jobs.[104] The amateur male actors are rarely paid more than transportation fees for Chennai performances, but women can be one of the biggest expenses of a troupe. Farley Richmond has explained that in

> Madras, for example, an amateur group is made up entirely of actors who are not compensated for their efforts, yet the women must be paid and are considered 'commercial' artists. More than one director has complained that competent actresses cannot be found to play the female characters in a play.[105]

Male actors tend to be exclusively associated with one troupe, while the women take roles where they can get them, often performing for several different troupes at the same time.[106] Many of these women will also work in film and television, which pay significantly better than live theater. Plays never have more than three female characters, and one or two are far more common because good actresses are expensive and hard to find. Even established troupes with regular female artists rarely keep them for more than

[103] Pritham Chakravarty, who acted with the troupe Shantiniketan as a child told me that she was paid thirty rupees per show. By the time she stopped around age fifteen (1978 or so) she was paid 500 rupees for a sabha play in Chennai and more if it was outside the city (interview, February 28, 2004). Kamala Kamesh, an older actress, told me that she used to receive 100 rupees per play and agreed with Pritham that the going rate is now 500 rupees for an evening performance (interview, April 22, 2004). Male actor Kaladhar Parthasarathy told me that he receives only one hundred rupees for an evening show in Chennai compared to 500 rupees for an out-of-station performance and 1000 rupees a day for television (interview August 16, 2003).

[104] My interview, July 8, 2003.

[105] Richmond 1990, p. 414.

[106] Shubha Ganesh, for example, acts for Kathadi, Rail Priya, Bharatirajan, Gitanjali, and others.

a few years. Some artists choose to write plays with no female characters especially to avoid this problem.

Even now when women regularly perform, the theater prides itself on its cleanliness and decency, and therefore avoids such taboos as men and women touching on stage. Another phenomenon is the troupe made up entirely of women. The best-known troupe of this type in Chennai is the Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Troupe headed by Bombay Gnanam. These women try to address various social issues in their work, and there are no male actors allowed. The women dress as men and play all the male roles, a reversal of the earlier trends, but in keeping with the purity principles of not mixing male and female performers on stage.

Although many female performers are professionals, some are amateurs and have an arrangement with a troupe very similar to the model of the male actors. These troupe members earn their livings by working at banks, for the railways, or in other jobs with fairly flexible schedules. They tend to work with one particular troupe that they joined either by having family or job-related connections with one of the male members. This is less harmful to a woman's reputation and marriage prospects than acting with strangers would be.

I translated one of Kathadi's plays called *Padi Thandiya Pathi* by Gajendra Kumar and was confused the whole time about whether one of the characters was supposed to be male or female. The verbs and terms of address just did not match, then at the end there was a whole scene that required a female character. When I asked Kathadi about it, he told me that the play was written with a female character in mind, but they had a performance one night that they could not get an actress for. She was there,

but the preceding function lasted so long that she would not be able to stay until the end of the play. Instead of getting one of the men to play her role dressed as a woman, like most troupes would have done, Kathadi rewrote the whole character. This also had the added benefit of shortening the play significantly, since it eliminated an entire subplot.

Crazy Mohan was new at writing plays when he wrote *Honeymoon Couple*, and his original version included four female characters, too many for sabha theater. The daughter Nandini's role was eventually made an entirely off-stage role. Any lines she needed to be on stage for were rewritten for her brother Dilip, and the off-stage microphone is used by the actress who plays Janaki to do her voice for the rest. This means that Nandini never needs to be seen on stage. Since her role is not really essential to the play except in so far as it is important for Ramani to have a marriageable daughter in order to establish his age and the incongruity of his going on a honeymoon, it was easy to cut, and thus simplified the production considerably. The other female role would have presented even more of a problem to stage because not only did it require a female actress, but one of a particular age and appearance.

Julie is an older half-white, half-Indian Australian woman who is staying at the bungalow in Ooty with them. The manager of the bungalow tells Ramani and Rukmini that she wants to marry an Indian man. Ramani is always lusting after her and being particularly stupid when she's around. There is an entire scene that was cut which involves Ramani taking her to Madras. The play is rewritten so that Ramani is always looking for her, but she's never around. When he does find her, it is off stage and can simply be related as a story to one of the other characters. This strategy allowed Kathadi to keep the story of a funny incident where Ramani sees Julie at the Botanical Gardens

and hides because he has taken his dentures out because they have fruit stuck in them. He doesn't want her to see him toothless. The dentures are broken by some kids and he needs new ones, which he asks the Maharaja's manager to procure for him. The Maharaja knows that he has special guests at the bungalow because his son and daughter-in-law are supposed to be there on their honeymoon. He is incredibly confused when the manager relays the request, because his young son, who had a full set of teeth when he set out for his honeymoon, shouldn't need a *pal set* ("tooth set") now.

There are several references of questionable taste in this play that refer to the fact that Ramani is a lecherous old man. Besides the whole Julie episode, the play opens on that note. Ramani has gotten out of his bed, so his wife thinks he's up, and moved to his daughter's bed in the living room and fallen back asleep. When Rukmini scolds him, he jokes about how she shouldn't be too upset since he could have sleep-walked across the street and got into the neighbor's bed. He says, "What would that lady have thought about me then? Forget about me. What would her husband have thought about *her*?"[107] He keeps looking at the neighbor lady and talking about her, then trying to get on his wife's good side by comparing her favorably with the neighbor.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the shared structure and quotidian aesthetic of sabha dramas. These plays tend to be scripted, but not published. They are a performance genre that privileges dialogue and depends on actors' skills at intonation and timing to keep the jokes alive. The pure comedy plays, like *Honeymoon Couple,* that sabhas tend to favor as the most commercially successful consist of thin plots that string together a series of jokes. Even though some attempt what they call "natural acting," the

[107] Mohan (Rudisill translation 2004), p. 2.

focus of sabha dramas is on the dialogue, which is usually very fast-paced and full of puns and allusions. This feature of the dramas helps keep them in the realm of performances rather than publications.

The amateur aesthetic, as I call it, of the performances is based on the premise that both performers and audiences are working people who participate in the occasional drama for fun. Characteristics of speed and convenience are elevated in the minds of writers and performers. Production aspects from the sets to the props to the lighting are minimal and serve to direct audience attention to the actors. Most sabha dramas concern the lives of everyday Tamil Brahmin families, with the logic of family situations pushed to the ultimate extreme. Quotidian language and costumes thus fit perfectly into these everyday stories. The caste identity is implicit in the performances, apparent in the dress, the speech, the terms of address, and the little rituals. The specificity of these markers shows the rooting of humor in particular cultural contexts. My reading of Kathadi Ramamurthy's *Honeymoon Couple* and of the plays in the following chapters are an attempt to think from humor to a deeper understanding of culture.

The chapters of Part II each illustrate a specific vision of culture that comes through in a particular play. My intent with these in-depth analyses is to gain some insight into issues of identity and taste within the sabha drama system. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* ("Marriage in Washington"), an early example of sabha drama from 1963, is considered a classic of the genre. The reading of this story and its presentation in the media of novel, drama, and television program that I present in the following chapter clarifies the connection between local politics and the emergence of this dramatic and theatrical genre in the post-Independence period. The play is self-consciously Brahmin

in a way that many of the later plays are not, and provides a good entry into both the theatrical genre and the self-identity of the Tamil Brahmin community.

PART II:
SABHA COMEDIES IN FOCUS

Chapter Five

A TRADITIONAL TAMIL BRAHMIN MARRIAGE IN WASHINGTON DC: PERFORMANCE OF CULTURE, PERFORMANCE OF SELF

On April 13, 2004 I walked into the outdoor theater at the Indira Nagar Youth Hostel in Chennai, right when Goodwill Stage's production of the play *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* ("Marriage in Washington") was about to begin. Despite their large number, all of the folding chairs were taken, mostly by elderly women, so the organizers took one from behind their table and placed it front and center for me. This was a play that I had heard about from many sources: my Tamil teacher, friends, actors, writers, and audience members at other plays, and I felt very fortunate to see a revival of the much-acclaimed forty-year-old drama. As I watched and listened, I wondered why this play, unlike so many others from the Tamil corpus, has lasted for so many years. It was one of the "classic" plays that Hamsadhvani, a long-time classical music organization, had chosen to resurrect while considering whether to add dramas to their entertainment schedule. During the intermission function they announced that they selected plays based on such factors as the former reception of the play and its family-oriented values.

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam is one of the earliest full-length Tamil-language comedy plays from the sabha genre, first performed by the now-defunct Triplicane Fine Arts in 1963. It was originally a serialized novel by Cāvi (1916-2001), which was published in the Tamil language weekly *Āṉanta Vikaṭaṉ* in the early-1960s. It was adapted as a stage play in 1963, a radio play around the same time, and produced as a television serial in 1995. The novel was finally published by Narmada Publishers in book form in 1999, and this history is a clear indication of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam's*

continued popularity over a forty-year period.[1] The play celebrated its 500th performance in May 2001 with a function sponsored by the Nataka Academy and Goodwill Stage at the Narada Gana Sabha. The story is obsessed with the conservative, traditional ideals of the Tamil Brahmin community, and offers a very elaborate description of a perfect Brahmin marriage, with careful attention paid to every small detail, foodstuff, and ritual. What makes this marriage so unusual is that it takes place in Washington, D.C., a place that author Cāvi "had not visited before writing the story."[2]

The story tells of the wealthy American Mrs. Rockefeller, who heard her friend describe a South Indian marriage, then decided that she must see one for herself. Accordingly, she arranged for an orthodox Tamil Brahmin marriage to happen right there in her hometown of Washington, D.C. By portraying the actions of good Brahmins and the proper way for family and community relations to work in an ideal society as a cultural performance[3] put on for the benefit of an audience comprising culturally ignorant tourists (the Americans in the story), *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* functions to educate the spectators and readers, who are actually cultural insiders. The Tamil language is replete with highly technical ritual and culinary terms that would only be followed by speakers who have been immersed in that particular Brahmin culture. The cultural misunderstandings the narrative is designed to exploit create great comic effects and

[1] I am working primarily from the 1999 novel, which is pretty faithful to the *Āṉanta Vikaṭaṉ* version, but also from my performance notes and a recording of the first fourteen episodes of the 1995 television serial. This recording was provided to me by actor R. Neelakanthan, who plays the groom's father on television and is an active member of the stage troupe Viveka Fine Arts. He does not act in the stage version of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* with Goodwill Stage.
[2] Swaminathan, Chitra. "Landmark Show." *The Hindu.* May 11, 2001.
[3] I use the phrase "cultural performance" in the way that Mary Hancock does (Hancock, Mary Elizabeth. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999). She expanded Milton Singer's conception (Singer, Milton B. *Traditional India: Structure and Change.* Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1959), which included the more obvious secular performances found in theaters, concert halls, radio programs, and films as well as private and public religious rituals, to include things such as dress, diet, and home décor.

allow audience members to identify with different characters and participate in the marriage on different levels. The humor and the versatility of the story have clearly appealed to many Tamils over the years.

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam comes out of a period that Itty Abraham has referred to as "the 'long' 1950s."[4] He and the other organizers of the 2006 "Long 1950s" pre-conference event in Madison, Wisconsin use the term to mark the period from about 1945 to 1965 "when a radically new set of political, economic, and socio-cultural institutions were being set in place across this region."[5] The play *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* was part of the new socio-cultural institution of sabha comedy plays that was becoming popular in the Chennai of the 1960s. The dramas are indicative of a new social and cultural trend in Tamilnadu as in other parts of the country to move from a pan-Indian focus to a more regional one. The universally known mythological and historical dramas that previously dominated India's stages yielded to narratives that were rooted in specific languages, regions, and communities.

Given its colonial history, it is no surprise that, just as Marilyn Ivy argues about Japan, India is "literally unimaginable outside its positioning vis-à-vis the West."[6] The post-colonial period followed colonial trends of reflecting on indigenous culture in relation to western cultural norms. China went through a similar development in the post-Mao period, when "there was a proliferation of practices that helped to constitute the social order through their reiteration of certain norms."[7] Many of these practices in both

[4] Abraham, "Call for Papers" for a preconference event to the Madison Conference on South Asia proposed and organized by him, Kamran Ali, and Willem van Schendal. The event was held October 19, 2006.
[5] Abraham, "Call for Papers," 2006.
[6] Ivy, Marilyn. *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity, Phantasm, Japan.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 4.
[7] Schein, Louisa. "Performing Modernity" in *Cultural Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (1999): 361-395, p. 368.

countries took the form of cultural performances that mediated these conflicting ideals of modernity and tradition. The novel *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* was a place where Tamil Brahmin identity was constituted and negotiated in the long 1950s, and it continues to fill that role for later generations of readers and spectators.

Cultural Narcissism

As the novel sets up the narrative, Mr. and Mrs. Hari Hops have taken a trip to India where they were fortunate enough to witness a traditional four-day Tamil Brahmin marriage in Tanjore. Upon their return to America, they shared their experience with their very good friend Mrs. Rockefeller. After viewing countless pictures, reading notes, and listening to their detailed descriptions for "four full days without a break,"[8] this wealthy woman decided that she must see a South Indian marriage for herself. No one ever suggested that she go to India to fulfill this desire.[9] "Yes," said Mr. Hops, "however much we describe it, you won't be able to understand all of that. Having brought a marriage party from South India, if you conduct the marriage right here, you can understand everything perfectly."[10] Mrs. Rockefeller immediately got on the phone and began planning, saying that to make the marriage perfect, she would go to any expense, bringing not only the family members to Washington, D. C. from Chennai, but also guests, priests, and cooks. This is an important point, because marriages are notoriously expensive in South India. The bride's family typically pays for the wedding (and usually a dowry as well), and it is common for families to go into a great deal of

[8] Cāvi. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam.* Chennai: Narmada Publishers, 1999, p. 22.
[9] Wealthy people, especially women, do not travel for their shopping, entertainment, or anything else. They pay the salesmen and performers to come to them. This may be one reason why the marriage had to take place in Mrs. Rockefeller's hometown, rather than her traveling to India to observe a wedding.
[10] Ibid., pp. 22-23. At the end of the novel, she offers to fly to India to personally conduct the marriage of Lali and Panju, who were so helpful to her with this marriage.

debt in order to marry their daughters properly. For this reason, marriages can be a serious source of stress for all of the family members involved.

The narcissism of the author about his culture is evident in the very set-up of the narrative. The "South Indian" marriage, which is obviously considered to be the pinnacle of "culture," is too rich and complex to be described, even with the help of notes and photos over a four-day period. Only by conducting it herself and being intimately involved in the planning and details could Mrs. Rockefeller, an outsider, have any hope of grasping the intricacies of culture inherent in a traditional marriage. Additionally, it is obviously a venerable and worthy goal to wish to learn about South Indian culture. No one seems to think that this is a strange undertaking, and it is clearly the most interesting thing happening in the city at the time. Journalists and photographers in Washington, D.C. are continually following the marriage party around asking questions and snapping photos so that they can try to explain this wondrous foreign culture to their enthusiastic readers. The smallest things draw huge crowds and headline the American newspapers.

Cultural Anxiety

The set-up of the *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* narrative reveals not only cultural narcissism, but also cultural anxiety. If the traditional marriage rituals were alive and well and projected to remain so, why record them in fiction? I argue that the story of this wedding is the result of two separate (national and community) cultural anxieties that were triggered by the momentous events of the long 1950s, which included such things as India's independence, the formation of a national cultural identity, the rise of the non-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu, the growing popularity of cinema, and the very real lure of an exotic, wealthy, and modern America.

The narrative offered an original way to preserve a record of the strict Tamil Brahmin cultural prescriptions that were quickly becoming impractical due to urban living, work schedules, and financial restrictions. It is an example of what I am calling "pre-emptive nostalgia," where a cultural practice is perceived to be endangered and is thus recorded both for the present generation to enjoy and for future generations to refer to. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam's* popular comedic form ensured its longevity.

The exotic locale of Washington D. C. as a setting for this marriage allowed readers and viewers to move into a fantasy world free from financial restrictions where every obstacle could be overcome simply by wishing for it. Far from their everyday lives, Cāvi's story "literally transported the Madras readers and audience to Washington with his realistic description of the place."[11] His description of Americans' relationship with money, however, is not realistic, but rather fantastic. The lavishness of the wedding, thanks to the Rockefellers, reveals the lofty financial aspirations of Tamil Brahmins. The fantasy here serves a deeper purpose than when exotic locales are used in film song-and-dance sequences because the exotic locale of the novel came complete with a whole cast of characters that interact with the marriage party. The presence of Americans who are ignorant about Tamil culture invites detailed explanations of rituals that any good Tamil Brahmin would be embarrassed to admit ignorance of. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* is not just entertainment, the charge so often levied at sabha theater, but also a way to revalue "South Indian" culture and (humorously) expose differences between it and American culture.

I argue that one of the reasons this play has continued to appeal to insider audiences over the years is that viewers and readers from different generations can

[11] Swaminathan, *The Hindu,* May 11, 2001.

appreciate it in different ways and for different reasons. For the older generation, the performance has all the pleasures of nostalgia; for the younger generation it is a record of a more "authentic" cultural milieu full of prescriptions from which they are free. Discourse about Tamil youth is often critical for this very reason. They are trying too hard to be "modern" and are "losing" their culture by aping films and American youth, lament the cultural conservatives of the older generation. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* allows for a displacement of tradition onto the past or onto ideal selves to which contemporary Tamils need not even aspire. These Brahmins perform *tradition,* not modernity, and they define their culture and cultural value by the measure of tradition. In this way they can revel in comic stereotypes of themselves and displace modernity onto the American characters and by association onto their modern selves. Self-reflexivity and the valorization of traditional cultural practices can be vocalized in this context because of the American characters.

The characters of the two priests in *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* proudly display their ignorance of modern life and America as opposed to the more cosmopolitan family members. Religion and tradition reveal them to be backwards and thus objects of humor. The play doesn't necessarily privilege this worldview, and is full of nostalgia and a desire to do things in a traditionally correct manner. Part of that project is to perform these cultural distinctions for the Americans, but there are not *really* Americans in the audience, only within the play itself.

Different Media, Different Messages

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam offers a unique opportunity for the researcher because it is available in three different media, and each adaptation has a different agenda and

audience. The discrepancies and variations among the three versions of the story reveal much about what works conceptually and narratively within each medium's limits as well as about their intended audiences. The television serial, coming so long after the novel and the play, must be analyzed in terms of the younger generation of viewers to whom it made the story available. Being directed at a broader audience, this version lost some of the technicalities of the novel and the play, but it still used the Brahmin dialect of Tamil and added other emphases (such as the newly conceived character of the marriage broker) that kept the story directed at local viewers.

The original publication of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* in *Ān̲anta Vikaṭaṉ* came out in the early 1960s, a period of intense reflection about the nature of newly independent "India" and "Indian culture." This period of the long 1950s was a period of pride and hope and conscious identity formation. The US loosened visa restrictions around this time and waves of educated immigrants from India, including many Tamil Brahmins, were moving to the US full of dreams of wealth and possibility. At the same time, Americans were dreaming of India as the land of peace and religion, and many were traveling there in search of spiritual enlightenment. Following Arjun Appadurai's argument in *Modernity at Large*[12] that people can imagine and actualize more and more different lives *because of* media and geographic mobility, it becomes clear that globalization doesn't necessarily mean homogenization of culture. The exchanges of culture and population between the two countries of India and America inspired discussion, emotion, and comparison, and *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* is one crucial site where this exchange is registered and validated. In fact, K. S. Nagarajan said that when

[12] See Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

he directed the play for Kala Nilayam, "we had some Americans appearing as guests for the wedding,"[13] an instance of actual cultural exchange facilitated by the play.

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam doesn't portray Americans as hippies cherishing images of Indians naked meditating on mountaintops and achieving nirvana, but instead as people amazed by and interested in the things that this particular group of Tamil Brahmin Indians were proud of and identified themselves with such as ritual and propriety. The magic of the novel is that it takes everyday things from Tamil Brahmin life and makes them wonderful in the eyes of the Americans, thus revaluing them in the eyes of Tamil readers who may have taken them for granted.

For example, a new well is built behind Mrs. Rockefeller's "summer house" so that the *pāṭṭis* (grandmas) can bathe in fresh well water. The sound of the un-oiled rope squeaking along the pulley sounded so melodious to Mrs. Rockefeller that she engaged two watchmen to make sure no oil could be applied, as was the norm. She raved so much that American musical experts, Hollywood orchestras, and music researchers converged on the summer house in order to research this fabulous music machine. After much discussion it is decided that either moving the instrument or trying to reconstruct it in the studio might be unsatisfactory, so recordings are made right there at the summer house to be used for background music in Hollywood films.

Most sabha plays are targeted at Brahmin audiences, and that is certainly true of this play. The theatrical version of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* naturally had to be much shorter than Cāvi's novel. There was no way to show the full four days of ritual and celebration in a two-hour production, so jokes and episodes had to be carefully selected. Two main features of the stage play have stood out to audiences over the years. First,

[13] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Undiminished Passion for the Stage." *The Hindu*. October 10, 2003.

this is the only sabha play that I (or my informants) know of that invites audience participation. At the end of the play the marriage procession actually leaves the stage and walks around the theater among members of the audience. Many audience members will stand up, congratulate the couple and their families, and perhaps offer a small gift. The play brings the audience into the fictional family and gets them personally invested in the project of bringing the marriage off successfully. Purnam Viswanathan, who acted the role of the bride's father more than three hundred times, related that the audience automatically got involved, even to the point of following the actors up onto the stage. He said there was a time when they were performing *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* almost daily and the audience would come dressed as elaborately as if it were an actual marriage.[14] This is commonly cited as a favorite play and many theater enthusiasts lament the fact that its innovative structure never took off in the genre or inspired others to follow its model.

Second, although comedian S. V. Shekher was the only one to discuss it explicitly with me, there is an audience expectation for entertainment and amusement that must be met for a play to remain popular. There are humorous situations built into the narrative of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam*, but the play's humor is really driven by the steady stream of short jokes based on cultural confusion. This is not the situation in the novel. Although it includes many jokes, it also includes long explanatory sections and detailed descriptions of Washington, menus, and other things. The play even includes jokes that are not explicitly told in the novel but fit easily into the story.

The character of Mrs. Rockefeller is central to both the novel and the play, but she is portrayed very differently in the two media. The play has only two hours in which to

[14] My interview with Purnam Viswanathan, May 20, 2004.

convey what the novel has 176 pages to do. There are also limits on the number of characters, especially female characters, that can be portrayed on stage. The drama troupe created the illusion that they were part of a very large cast because several actors played more than one role. They even expanded the number of female characters beyond the number of available actresses by having at least one (the blouseless, appalam[15]-making grandmother) played by a male actor, which had the added benefit of intensifying an already humorous episode. The play, unlike the novel, also includes the characters of Mr. Rockefeller and their young daughter. The very costumes of the Rockefeller family are used to poke fun at Americans in a way that the novel never did. There is never any indication in the novel that Mrs. Rockefeller looks ridiculous or inappropriate, but that is certainly part of the stage play. The elder Rockefellers sported these horrible very fake-looking orange wigs (perhaps a way of masking the fact that the actors were typical brown-skinned Indians) and Mrs. Rockefeller wore a green velvet suit. The daughter, who I estimated at about twelve years of age, wore a green velvet dress that was *very* short. No comments were made in the play regarding her attire, and perhaps it was simply the only vaguely American-looking dress to be had. On top of the outfit, the daughter was wearing a bright pink wig.

The play also updates some of the traditional rituals of the novel for a more modern audience. For example, the Janavasam ritual is the ceremonial arrival of the bridegroom. In the past and in the world of the *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* novel, this procession was held on foot. The ritual has not disappeared in modern times; it is still held in some token way by Tamil Brahmins that value their culture and consider this to be an integral part of it. What this means today is that the bridegroom and his entourage

[15] A fried, cracker-like treat.

usually arrive by car. When K. S. Nagarajan directed the play for Kala Nilayam, he said that he "engaged Nari koravas[16] to carry hurricane lamps during the Janavasam scene in 'Washingtonil Tirumanam' and a car was brought to circle the auditorium."[17]

The drastic change made by the television serial is the erasure of the character of Mrs. Rockefeller, who is so central to both the novel and the play. She is replaced by two characters: Margaret, the American wife of Hari Hops (who in the novel is Mrs. Rockefeller's friend but in the serial is a friend of the bride's father), and Katherine, the college friend of Vasi, the bride, who in this version is a US permanent resident and attends Columbia University. Additionally, the journalists of the earlier versions are replaced by a variety of random Americans who encounter the priests here and there and ask questions that allow for explanations of things like the tuft of hair that they sport and the *takḷi* (Indian-style supported spindle) they use to make thread.

The absence of Mrs. Rockefeller meant that the marriage budget, unlike in the earlier versions, was not unlimited. In the novel, when two lakh coconuts (200,000) were requested she said, "Is that all? I'll fly in one million from our large estate in Hawaii." The play upped this offer to two million. Everything cheerfully and in excess is the theme of the novel and the play. In the television serial however, money suddenly becomes an object. This shift allowed the groom's mother, who was previously a very minor character, to take on her traditional role of being demanding and trying to get as much out of the reluctant bride's family as possible. Her husband is overwhelmed by everything they have done and enjoys seeing Washington; she angles for an all-expenses-paid trip to Niagara Falls, as well. In addition, the bride's family, well-to-do permanent

[16] Members of a tribe of traditional trappers and hunters in Tamilnadu.
[17] Santhanam, *The Hindu,* October 10, 2003.

residents in the US, can only fly twenty-five people over from India for the marriage. This means that there is much negotiation over who makes that cut, as the list has to include cooks as well as priests and family members. There are entire episodes devoted to these negotiations, which are not an issue in the novel, where Mrs. Rockefeller is chartering four flights a day between Madras and Washington, D. C. and bringing in everyone she can think of, including distant relatives and unrelated older village women who are contracted to make the appalams.

The novel and the play focus on anecdotes about Americans who don't understand Indian culture, while the television serial does the opposite. There are long sequences in the serial with no dialogue, and sometimes no visible characters, that do nothing to advance the narrative, but simply show the many tourist sites of Washington, D. C. that the characters visit. The opening credits are, in fact, a montage of these scenes. Many of these, such as the NASA Preview Research Center and the Statue of Liberty (which is *not* in Washington) are not part of the original novel. The television program takes the opportunity to show Indians viewing at home the exciting attractions of Washington, D.C. This footage, which really makes the viewer feel well-traveled and cosmopolitan, is not possible either in the novel or on the stage. In those media, the specific attractions are mentioned in so far as they are either important settings for the action or in order to make a joke. A good example that appears in all three versions of the story is the visit to the Lincoln Memorial. The priests hear that they are going to see the "Lingam Mandapam"[18] and get very excited. They happily prepare to perform puja (daily worship rituals) there until someone kindly explains that "Lincoln" is the name of a former U.S. president and has nothing to do with the god Siva.

[18] A "lingam" is a representation of the god Shiva in the form of a phallus.

The television serial is more realistic than the novel or the play that followed so soon after. There are so many diasporic Indians in Washington that a few women putting a kolam[19] in front of a house would not draw the huge crowd described in Cāvi's novel. Instead, the serial shows only the bride's friend Katherine, her boyfriend, and her mother watching from a nearby vantage point and commenting to one another about how beautiful the design is. Likewise, it is outside of the realm of belief that the priest would be invited to give an exhibition of thread-making from the top of the Washington Monument, or that there would be headlines in the newspapers about some guy making thread. The television program transforms the huge crowd of journalists into a single interested neighbor who flippantly suggests that the priest take his *takḷi* to the top of the Empire State Building (again, *not* in Washington) and asks if she can do a write-up for their neighborhood publication. This allows the screenplay writers to use Cāvi's wonderful English-language rhyming headline "Spinning Man from Gandhi Land" and preach a bit about how wonderful Gandhi was.

Authentic Ritual Performances

The theatrical version of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* is a "ritual" in two different ways. First, the play is repeated over and over, following the same script and stage directions. Second, it is a play about a marriage ritual, which is the ritual that conservative Tamil Brahmins hold most dear. This play is unusual because it publicly stages for both the live Indian audience and the American characters the usually behind-the-scenes marriage preparations along with the conducting of all the small rituals associated with the marriage, to which most guests would not be privy. It is common for people to perform culture through rituals or dramas that are designed for tourist

[19] Design in rice-flour often done outside the entrance to a building (called a *rangoli* in North India).

audiences, but this is a tourist performance once removed, where even the tourists are characters performing for locals. Tourist performances highlight what is essential about a culture as well as what can be easily understood across cultures. They are understood as being selective representations and no tourist performance (though it may claim to be) is believed to be "authentic."

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam is not designed for tourists. It is, in fact, a cultural performance that is geared toward the same insular audience as a real marriage ceremony. This play offers a way for the Tamil Brahmin community to define itself internally as well as to the outside world on its own terms. The identity that Tamil Brahmins both embrace and struggle with is *traditional* and *conservative.* These characteristics are both celebrated and mocked in the world of *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam.* For example, in the television serial, when Margaret Hops offers to read the palm of one of the priests, he declines, saying that he cannot touch any woman except his wife, even in this innocent fashion, in an exaggerated display of modesty. This scene has the added effect of painting the American Mrs. Hops as immodest, even though she is dressed in a nine-yard sari and the palm reading was her husband's suggestion.

Tamil Brahmins tend to define their culture and cultural value by the measure of tradition. In an article about modern dance choreography in India, Krishna Chaitanya lamented that "the situation in India seems to be solidly and stolidly hostile to the least innovation" and that Indian classicists are "fanatically orthodox," as evident in their reviling of the innovative dance choreographies of Chennai dancer Chandralekha.[20] Similarly, acclaimed dancer Yamini Krishnamurthy recorded her doubts about

[20] Chaitanya, Krishna. "Indian Dance: Naïve Longings for Winds of Change." *Sangeet Natak* 83, (January-March, 1987): 5-13, p. 6.

performing in the Kuchipudi style in Chennai because the Tamil Brahmins, who saw Bharata Natyam as "the only worthwhile dance form," were sure to react with a "swift and cruel negative" to her performance.[21]

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam revels in this stereotype without losing its sense of humor. Tamil Brahmins of the 1960s may have been traditional with regard to their culture, but they were also educated and cosmopolitan. The narrative includes many jokes that require knowledge of both American culture and the English language. All of Mrs. Rockefeller's lines are in English, but are written in the painstaking transliteration that is so difficult to read that writers like Cho Ramasamy actually chose to publish their plays in two separate scripts. A good example of cultural competence is the joke that when the Americans hear that there is "oil" in some little seeds that the priest has, they assume it is oil for their cars, not for cooking, and hail him as a genius for discovering it.

The part of the Tamil marriage ritual that most perplexes the Americans in *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* is something called the "campandi caṇṭai" ("the fight of the in-laws"). No marriage can be perfect, or to put it another way, a perfect marriage includes a fight between the groom's family and the bride's family. No one is really bothered by this development except for the Americans who can't stand to see people fighting and fear that the marriage may actually be called off after all the hard work that has gone into it. The Tamils understand that there must always be a crisis in married life, and this ritual is a way of dispensing with that crisis *before* the marriage in order for the couple to enjoy a peaceful married life. In the end, Mrs. Rockefeller understands the important role that the groom's uncle played by expressing his dissatisfaction and causing trouble. Out of

[21] Krishnamurti, Yamini. *A Passion for Dance: My Autobiography.* With Renuka Khandekar. New Delhi: Viking Press, 1995, p. 72.

gratitude for his troublesome but necessary actions, she presents him with a car at the end of the story.

Modernity and Authenticity

The pleasure of the younger generation in this story from the 1960s begs the question of how authentic Tamil Brahmin traditions reconcile with modernity. Anthropologist Louisa Schein's work on the Miao minority in China and the traditional/modern conflict visible in the performative aspects of actual wedding rituals raises some interesting questions and issues with regard to the Brahmin minority in Chennai and their performances of marriage. The rural Miao are constantly faced with a reputation for being "backward" as compared to the urban Han majority. They perpetuate this stereotype by continuing their drinking rituals and using elaborate Miao dress for the bride, but bring a taste of the "modern" to the proceedings by including the wedding gift of a beautifully-framed poster of a "blonde model in a hot pink G-string bikini reclined atop a snazzy racing car"[22] in photos with the bride and youthful urbane guests wearing T-shirts and carrying beepers ("despite the fact that there would be no phone on which to return calls…in Xijiang"). Tamil Brahmins, on the other hand, are extremely well-educated and many have traveled. They may wear western clothes and watch English movies on a regular basis, and mobile phones are everywhere in Madras.[23] The marriage ritual, however, is not the place to display these transgressions of traditional culture. Instead, it is the time for all the women (even those who wear jeans to

[22] Schein 1999, p. 374.

[23] One of my favorite images from my fieldwork is from a very elaborate ceremony held by some Brahmin friends to celebrate the construction of their new home behind the Music Academy. There were many priests involved in the function, and every one of them carried a cell phone. These phones were hung around their necks or tucked into the waistband of their veshtis and were constantly being used. On this auspicious day there were a number of functions to coordinate and traditionally-dressed priests with their sacred threads, topknots, and markings of ash and kumkum were busy coming in and out as needed and sending one another text messages.

college on a regular basis) to dig out their fancy silk saris and put jasmine flowers in their hair.

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam glorifies tradition and a strict adherence to the proper rituals. The question is whether it allows for the possibility that shortened and simplified rituals can still be authentic. Louisa Schein wrote that

> [t]hrough nostalgia, traditions were historicized, consigned to the past. Through mediation, culture was rendered as a slick surface of images. Through commodification, culture was alienated from embedded social process. And through formal staging—whether for tourists or for themselves—rituals became transactions between spectators and performers.[24]

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam certainly mediated the marriage ritual for Tamil mass audiences through television, commodified it through the novel, and staged it for years as a drama. However, I argue that its billing as "entertainment" and its tenor as humorous have kept its championing of lengthy, expensive ritual prescriptions squarely in the realms of fantasy and nostalgia.

Most sabha plays are about this all-important life-event of marriage. The narratives either end in marriage or immediately follow one. The staging of the marriage ritual itself, however, is usually very perfunctory. The audience might hear a recording of a nadaswaram[25] playing or see the couple exchanging garlands. These are sufficient markers for them to understand that the marriage has been completed. A few famous plays such as Kathadi Ramamurthy's *Dowry Kalyana Vaibogame* and Raadhu's *Kalyāṇattil Kalāṭṭā* focus on the negotiations and family relations that are involved in the arranging of a marriage and everything that needs to be done to keep the two parties

[24] Schein 1999, p. 367.
[25] A double-reed woodwind instrument that is considered to be auspicious and often found at temples and weddings.

happy and committed to the match. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* is actually a non-efficacious marriage ritual performed on stage.

There is something voluntary and calculated about performances on a stage that is not there in regular performances of culture in daily life that the sabhas can tap in their ongoing work of taste creation. A dramatic ritual elaborately planned and repeatedly staged may actually be a more authoritative and ideal performance of culture than one performed sloppily by everyday people living their lives. Marriage rituals may change, but the playscript and the novel stand still, which makes them easy targets for analysis.

In addition to the comfort of familiarity, there are several other incentives for consumers of these cultural objects: the back story and the four days of ritual are all encapsulated into a two-hour block of entertainment, it is cheap to attend and put on, the politics are never personal, and mistakes and misunderstandings are funny, not tragic, in this fictional setting. For the researcher, there are at least two advantages. First, staged performances are "partitioned off" from everyday life and the disjunctions and continuities between the two can reveal a lot about a community's self-perception. Second, the ideal attention to the details of the wedding that takes place in *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* are not adhered to so strictly in actual weddings when there are real people and families and budgets to accommodate.

Conclusion:

This chapter argues that the play *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* has remained relevant to audiences for so many years because it offers different things to different generations of viewers. It appeared shortly after India's independence at the height of the anti-Brahmin movement in Tamilnadu and reflects the identity conflicts within a community

trying to define itself as both traditional and modern and suffering from the dual impulses of cultural narcissism and cultural anxiety. *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* serves as a place where Tamil Brahmin identity can be continually re-constituted and re-negotiated through its transfer to different media.

The narrative helps preserve a record of the strict Tamil Brahmin cultural prescriptions that had become impractical and to educate the younger generations about how a proper marriage should be performed. I argue that this phenomenon can be called "pre-emptive nostalgia," referring to a cultural practice that is perceived to be endangered is recorded in an entertainment genre both for the present generation to enjoy and for future generations to refer to.

Washingtonil Tirumaṇam is a performance of *tradition*, the measure by which Tamil Brahmins tend to evaluate their culture. The American characters, who find the South Indian culture presented in the novel so wonderful, revalue everyday things and practices in the eyes of contemporary Tamil readers. The narrative displaces tradition onto the past or onto ideal selves to which contemporary Tamils need not aspire and allows them to associate themselves with modernity.

The following chapter turns to another part of the Tamil Brahmin identity: middle-classness. One marker of being middle-class is to have servants. Most of the plays, however, erase this class of characters that members of the Tamil-Brahmin community interact with on a daily basis. I analyze two sabha dramas from very different time periods (the early 1950s and the early 1990s) which share the plot device of a middle-class Brahmin husband masquerading as a servant in order to discuss the issue of acceptable interactions between members of disparate economic and social classes.

Chapter Six

HUSBAND OR SERVANT? MASQUERADE AND MIDDLE-CLASS IDENTITY IN SABHA DRAMAS

It is common for members of the educated middle-class community in Madras to have servants. There are two famous sabha plays, written forty years apart, that address relations between members of this class and the servants with whom they interact daily from the perspective of the employers. Servant-employer relations are explored in these plays without crossing any real boundaries since in both cases the middle-class audience members know that the male "servant" is actually the husband in disguise.

Undersecretary was adapted from Ramesh Mehta's Hindi version by actor Purnam Viswanathan shortly after he first saw it in Delhi in 1950 and is one of the earliest full-length comedy plays in Tamil.[1] He converted the background details (names, places, and so on) to Tamil and says that he made several more substantial changes while maintaining the integrity of the "whole theme of the play."[2] Purnam and later Y. G. Parthasarathy of United Amateur Artists made famous the role of Ramasamy, a clerk in a government office who masqueraded as a servant in his own home, allowing his wife's cousin to impersonate him as an "undersecretary" to fool her old school friend into thinking they were better off financially than they are. This play has not been done in many years but was performed more than four hundred times by Purnam and more than fifty by UAA, and is fondly remembered by theatergoers, especially for former Chief Minister Jayalalitha's acting debut in the role of Kantha.

[1] Purnam told me that his Tamil version was also translated into Malayalam (Interview, May 20, 2004).
[2] My interview with Purnam Viswanathan, May 20, 2004.

Ramasamy's wife Rajamma has recently renewed correspondence with her old school friend Pushpa who now lives in north India. When Pushpa tells Rajamma that her husband Gopal is a "deputy director," Rajamma builds up her own husband from a lowly clerk to an important government official, an "undersecretary." The lie would have passed harmlessly, but Pushpa and her husband just happen to be making a trip to Chennai and decide to visit. Rather than coming clean, Rajamma feels she must keep up her and her husband's prestige, so she rents fancy furniture and completely changes the house for the duration of their visit. She also arranges to hire the neighbor's servant Sauri to help their own servant Kali and make them look wealthier than they are. Ramasamy is not an all happy with his wife, feeling that there is no shame in being an ordinary clerk and that the house should match his status. He is overruled by Rajamma and her unmarried cousin Shankar, who has turned up unannounced from Bombay for a visit. Under duress, after Rajamma threatens to run away since she can't face the shame of being exposed, he agrees to the plan, but when Sauri gets sick and Kali has to rush home for a family emergency it seems impossible to carry off. Rajamma and Shankar suggest that Ramasamy himself play the role of the servant, and Shankar will pretend to be him, the "undersecretary." They think that they can pull it off for the single day that the guests will be there. There are a number of complications, but in the end they are exposed by Gopal, who recognized Ramasamy from when they were childhood friends, and who confesses that his wife built him up in a lie as well and that he is not a deputy director. The lessons of the play all address false prestige and the perils of trying to pretend to be more important and wealthy than you actually are.

S. Ve. Shekher's 1993 play *Ci<u>ṉṉ</u>a Māpiḷē, Periya Māpiḷē* ("Younger Son-in-Law, Elder Son-in-Law"),[3] was performed over one hundred times in its first year and has been continually performed over the last fourteen years by the polished troupe Natakapriya in addition to being a very popular audiocassette. This play, which features comedian S.Ve. Shekher masquerading as an unmarried servant so that he can teach his new brother-in-law a lesson about the realistic boundaries of his influence, has built-in opportunities to rethink some socially repressive cultural norms.

Ci<u>ṉṉ</u>a Māpiḷē, Periya Māpiḷē is the story of a young couple, Jana and Hema, who are in love and wish to be married. Hema's father agrees to the match even though Jana is a writer of Tamil dictionaries, educated, but with no prestige, but Hema's sister Savitri's husband Dog Narasimhan, does not. Dog is a detective in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, and wishes for Hema to marry a police officer in Chennai, who could be useful to his career. Jana and Hema get married anyway, and Dog orders them up to Hyderabad the very same day. Incensed, and knowing that Dog Narasimhan and Savitri are looking for Tamil-speaking servants, Jana heads up to Hyderabad alone to secure positions as both their cook and their driver. He is thus on-hand when Hema arrives without her husband. They talk Jana's friend Kannan into pretending to be Hema's husband, a police officer, and the complicated masquerade is revealed when Dog Narasimhan botches a kidnapping case he has been working on and is saved and shamed by Jana. With Dog's acceptance of Jana into the family, and the kidnapped girl Nisha's return to her lover (Jana's friend Kannan), everything is resolved and all is well.

[3] The story and dialogue were written by T. D. R. (T. Durai Raj) and the special effects, script editing, and direction are by S. Ve. Shekher.

The sabha genre is targeted at the middle class and deals with issues relevant to their situation. They interact with servants every day, and these two plays address those relations in an unthreatening, but not uncritical manner, through the device of the husband in disguise. In this way, the plays give many humorous examples of how employers and servants should and should not behave and interact in a variety of stressful situations. These scenes highlight the ridiculousness of certain cultural attitudes and occasionally even stretch the boundaries of acceptable interactions between the different social and economic classes in India, particularly between middle-class women and their male servants.

Although it is easy to find the humor in these plays, especially in the false inversion of class relations, it is harder to understand the pleasure of the middle class in laughing at themselves in the form of the ridiculous employer in Shekher's play that takes the side of the clever servant. The older *Undersecretary* does not challenge class relations as much as Shekher's more recent play, since Ramasamy in the role of servant is never in a position of power. This play instead uses Ramasamy's failings in contrast to the real servant's virtues to show the audience how the relations between the classes should be in a perfect world.

The Artists

Like Kathadi Ramamurthy, S. Ve. Shekher is not primarily a writer, but an actor. The dialogues for his plays are written by a variety of people, each one doing just a few plays for him. This approach allows someone like Shekher to continue to update his plays based on current events. He says, "I give a lot of scope for improvisation. That day's main political happenings must be added to make the play live up to and relate to

contemporary life."[4] An excellent example of this is the recent title change of *Ciṉṉa Māpiḷē, Periya Māpiḷē* to *CM-PM* and the political satire that accompanied the change. The new title opened the way for jokes about the Chief Minister (CM) and the Prime Minister (PM) and their relative power that spoke particularly to Tamil voters in the late 1990s. In 1998, Tamilnadu Chief Minister J. Jayalalitha, "in a game of political extortion…held the BJP government…hostage" in order to get concessions for her state. The BJP was dependent on the AIADMK's eighteen parliamentary seats for its survival, and when Jayalalitha withdrew from the coalition in April of 1999, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee lost the vote of confidence by one vote, the government fell, and new elections had to be held. [5]

Shekher is an actor who lives for live theater because that is where he can best utilize his gift of improvisation and direct communication with audiences. He actually had his first acting experience in *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam*. He told an interviewer that he had gone to buy tickets for the play for his family "when the director, Nagarajan, made [him] do a female role in it."[6]

His father S. Ve. Venkatraman also acted on stage and in films, and encouraged his son, who holds a Diploma in Mechanical Engineering and a Post Diploma in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration, to pursue his performance career. Shekher started his own troupe, Natakapriya, in 1974, which today commands higher rates from sabhas than

[4] Gopalie, S. "Metro Amateur Theatre (1965-1985): A Project Report." Senior Fellowship of Cultural Ministry, 2002, p. 228.
[5] Hardgrave, Robert L., Jr., and Stanley A. Kochanek. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation.* 6th ed. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt College Publishers, 2000, pp. 306-7, 319. In the October 1999 elections the AIADMK allied with the Congress Party, but the new, stronger alliances formed by the BJP with other parties led to the return of Vajpayee to the Prime Ministership, where he remained for a full five-year term. Jayalalitha again allied with Vajpayee in the 2004 elections, which they lost. See http://inic.utexas.edu/asnic/hardgrave/Elections1999.html (viewed April 30, 2006).
[6] Kumar, S. R. Ashok. "S. Ve. Shekher, Down to Earth and Intense." *The Hindu*. April 7, 2006.

any other in Chennai. Although he has a sense of humor both on stage and in person, when it comes to Natakapriya he is completely professional and a perfectionist.

Natakapriya's first play, *Avaṉ oru Taṉi Maram* ("He is a Lone Tree") was written and directed by Mouli, who had become well known through his association with United Amateur Artists,[7] and later formed his own troupe Mouli and Friends. He now works exclusively in the film world. Audiences attended the play because of Mouli and the fact that the lead actor was famous film comedian C. K. Nagesh. Shekher did the special effects and substituted for other actors if the need arose. It wasn't until 1976, when Shekher began collaborating with writer Crazy Mohan, that he started directing and really became a comedian in his own right. S. Ve. Shekher is an active personality in Chennai. He has a radio program (on Radio Mircchi), a television show ("All in All Shekher" on Vijay TV), is president of the Tamilnadu Television Artists Union,[8] acts in films, and was recently (2006) elected as an MLA from the Mylapore consituency. He said in an interview that since his plays take place in the evenings, they would not interfere with his new responsibilities and might, in fact, allow him to better serve his constituency because "theatre can be used to share ideas and propagate issues."[9] Shekher also frequently appears solo as a guest for various corporate functions, judge for *Paṭṭimaṉṟam* debates,[10]

[7] He wrote the famous plays *Flight 172* (1970) and *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (1971) while he was with them. Mouli is one of the rare playwrights who kept the rights to his plays. His brother S. B. Kanthan is the director for sabha drama troupe Crazy Creations.
[8] Rangarajan, Malathi. "TV Actors' Unions—Standing Asunder." *The Hindu*, November 28, 2003. He had been president of the organization for eight years as of November, 2003.
[9] http://mylaporemla.blogspot.com/2006/06/s-ve-shekher-is-mylapores-mla.html, viewed June 18, 2007.
[10] John Bernard Bate describes them as debates on "pre-determined topics on everyday life or literature" in which "two sides take opposing positions and argue several rounds, frequently involving comic asides and jabs at their opponents, which are finally resolved in a long (1-2 hour) summation of the argument and problem being debated by the 'Judge' (*nītipati*) or 'Mediator' (*naṭuvar*) of the proceedings." Bate, John Bernard. "*Mēṭaittamiḻ:* Oratory and Democratic Practice in Tamilnadu." Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000, pp. 10-11.

or simply as a speaker for special events. Many other members of Natakapriya are also involved in film and television.

There are many entertainments available in the city of Chennai, especially after the New Economic Policy of 1991, and attracting educated fans demands skillful marketing. As mentioned earlier, S. Ve. Shekher realized early on that the Brahmin dialect and subject matter of typical sabha plays would severely limit his audiences and so he broke from the norm by making a point of speaking standard Madras Tamil in his plays, keeping the families and themes as generic as possible, and employing both Brahmin and non-Brahmin actors.[11] He has made it his business to appeal to the broadest audience base he could, and has succeeded more than any other performer in reaching them through the mass media of audiocassettes. Almost any cassette shop will sell his audiocassettes, and possibly one or two of Crazy Mohan's. A cassette is cheaper than even the cheapest seats at one of his shows and can be enjoyed countless times.

One of the reasons that Shekher's cassettes are so popular, more so than other groups who have tried to break into the market (for example, Crazy Mohan or Kathadi Ramamurthy) is that he, like Purnam Viswanathan, was originally trained as an actor through radio. Shekher started his career in advertising and sound, and is a genius at editing, sound effects, and voices. Soon after he started his troupe, he also "became an approved artist of the All India Radio, in the Drama section. That was a great advantage for me. I learned all about voice modulation. How to play up or play down a sentence.

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[11] In fact, he doesn't think he has the unequivocal support of the Brahmin community. He said of his close margin of victory in the election over the DMK candidate, actor Napoleon, that "the Lok Paritran candidate seems to split the votes. Votes from the Brahmin community, the educated and of the young seem to have gone to the Lok Paritran candidate" (*Mylapore MLA.* http://mylaporemla.blogspot.com/2006/06/s-ve-shekher-is-mylapores-*mla.html*, June 1, 2006. Blog viewed on June 17, 2007).

Only Radio plays can give, as they survive only by sound (*sic*)."[12] He still does a weekly radio program for Radio Mircchi in Chennai, on which he tells jokes.

The style of his productions reflects this emphasis on the audio over the visual. Shekher rarely distracts viewers from the dialogue by set or costume, since sets are minimal and both sets and costumes vary little from drama to drama. Actors actually face the audience most of the time they are speaking to one another and the theme music and sound effects kick in at opportune moments. Shekher is often criticized by other artists for keeping the microphones so visible on stage and directing the actors to just stand around them to talk.

In contrast to this, Purnam Viswanathan is famous for his "natural acting" and in his dramas the actors face each other when they talk in their normal voices assisted by unobtrusive microphones. Purnam's feeling is that when an actor delivers dialogues he doesn't need any artificial acting or expression. "Not acting is acting," he told me,[13] but all the years of voice training and radio gave him remarkable projection, far superior to that of most sabha theater actors. *Undersecretary*, much closer to the colonial roots of the sabha genre than *CM-PM*, takes a lot of care with its single set of the ideal upper-middle-class living room, every detail described in the text.

Purnam Viswanathan was born in 1920 and grew up during the movement for India's independence. His father, a successful lawyer as well as a music and language enthusiast who had studied Sanskrit, felt that it was very important for all Indians to learn Hindi, which Purnam did enthusiastically. He was involved with scriptwriting and play production in high school and college, participating in primarily Hindi language

[12] Gopalie 2002, p. 219.
[13] Interview, May 20, 2004.

productions, along with a few Tamil and English plays. He took a job with All India Radio (AIR) in June of 1945 and worked for them in Delhi as a newsreader, translator, playwright, producer, actor, and talent scout. He told me that he was the one who read the first news of India's independence on AIR in 1947 and that in 1997 they invited him to announce the news again for the Golden Jubilee celebrations.[14] During his time in Delhi, Purnam was involved with a small play production club called South Indian Theaters that did short plays in Tamil and Hindi. He trained Delhi Kumar and other Tamil actors in Delhi and also knew Y. G. Parthasarathy there.

In 1964 Purnam moved back to Madras and quickly became an important figure in the Tamil theater scene. He did some work with Seva Stage on a contract basis and joined Triplicane Fine Arts during their production of Cāvi's *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam.* When their key artist died, the group was not maintained and Purnam went to Kala Nilayam with Marina and K. S. Nagarajan. The troupe mostly performed Marina's plays about middle-class Brahmin families, and Purnam made many of the roles famous, particularly that of the *atimpēr* (brother-in-law) in 1969's *Taṉi Kuṭittaṉam*. In the mid-1970s Kala Nilayam split. K. S. Nagarajan kept the troupe's name and continued its work, and in 1979 Marina started his troupe Rasika Rangam and Poornam, who had since retired from his work at AIR, started Purnam New Theater.[15]

Purnam New Theater primarily performed plays by Sujatha, who had given two plays to Kala Nilayam. Sujatha wrote ten plays for Purnam New Theater, the first being *Adimārkaḷ*, which was inaugurated October 11, 1979. They did one new play a year and

[14] Interview, May 20, 2004.
[15] My interview with M. B. Moorthy, May 16, 2004.

Purnam holds the exclusive rights to produce these plays.[16] Many of the actors in the new troupe were from Kala Nilayam, including Baladev, who now works for the *Indian Express*, Ravi Jagannatha, Vishnu, and the actress Shobha. The late Viji Sulochana of Seva Stage, for whom Purnam had done contract work, was the primary lady artist in the beginning of Purnam New Theater.

Purnam New Theater continued from 1979 until 1995, when Purnam dissolved it. At that time there were not as many opportunities to perform, he was seventy-five years old, and had cinema commitments. Since they couldn't have Purnam New Theater without Purnam, M. B. Murthy, Gauri, and some of the actors from the troupe decided to re-organize themselves, with his blessings, as Gurukulam Original Boys Company '95. They had to find new writers and all new plays because no one wanted to try to reprise Purnam's roles, feeling that they would only disappoint his fans.[17]

The Plays

In the world of sabha plays, as in the world of the auditorium, large portions of the poor and the variety of ethnic groups are eliminated from Madras society due to financial and linguistic constraints. Those who do appear, such as the servant Kali in *Undersecretary* or the Telugu speakers in *CM-PM,* are middle-class stereotypes of these groups introduced to highlight the uniqueness of middle-class Tamils or to focus on the problems of members of the Tamil diaspora. It is clear from the cultural and linguistic references that the target audience is educated and wealthy, though performers claim to

[16] A few of the plays are *Oru Kolai, Oru Prayanam*, which is actually two short plays with an intermission, *Anpulla Appa, Uruvan Patukal, Dr. Narendra, Adimehal, Maratal Varum*, and *Unjal*, which was a play based on "Death of a Salesman" that was done on stage then appeared on TV in 1990 or so. Purnam's daughter Uma called it a "very touching story" in which Poornam plays the head of family with plans for various projects he's trying to earn 15,000 rupees for. She related that after seeing the play, her sister came and brought Purnam the money the next day (My interview, May 20, 2004).

[17] My interview with M. B. Murthy and other members of Gurukulam, May 16, 2004.

be more universal and the actual audience need not be so limited because of the mass media.[18] Popular as they are, however, these comedies are derided in the press for their lack of seriousness and message, overlooking the element of gravity in the subtle critiques of certain practices and attitudes of the middle class that are revealed in the language and culture jokes and humorous situations. This critical tendency is especially evident with regard to class pretensions and relationships between classes in these two plays.

Undersecretary begins with a lie Rajamma has told to her old school friend Pushpa that her husband Ramasamy, actually a lowly clerk, is an undersecretary in a government office. When Pushpa and her husband Gopal come to visit, the house is thrown into an uproar by the elaborate drama the couple puts on to convince their guests of their (false) high status. The wife's cross-cousin Shankar,[19] a bachelor who would be her perfect marriage partner, is visiting, and they have decided that his personality would make for a better undersecretary than her husband's. But when their real servant's father gets sick, and the servant Kali leaves for his village, the husband is compelled to play the servant role since a respectable middle-class family cannot be without servants and they cannot afford to hire another one. The humor comes primarily from the audience's knowledge of everyone's true identities and relationships and their unsuitability for the roles they are playing. Purnam felt that this narrative strategy, where the audience was taken into the writer's confidence and nothing was hidden from them, allowed them to

[18] *Ci<u>nn</u>a Māpḷē, Periya Māpḷē* is widely available on audiocassette. *Undersecretary*, along with most of Purnam's other dramas, was part of Doordarsan's drama series, produced by S. Gopalie in the 1970s and 1980s. This play was also published as a book by Alliance Press in 1992.

[19] Her mother's brother's son (See Trawick, Margaret. *Notes on Love in a Tamil Family.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990 on Tamil kin relations).

participate more fully in the story.[20] The clerk Ramasamy is a terrible servant, unable to even make coffee, and Shankar is a terrible government employee, not knowing the least thing about what they do and considering consulting with his "servant" on difficult questions.

Ci<u>nn</u>a Māpḷē, Periya Māpḷē is about a young couple (Jana and Hema) whose love marriage is impeded by Hema's sister Savitri's husband, Dog Narasimhan, the *Periya Māpḷē* (older son-in-law), of the family. Immediately after their marriage, Dog Narasimhan, an important detective ("Periya Zero Zero Seven," as he describes himself) who lives in Hyderabad[21] and was unable to attend their wedding, canceled their "First Night" (the night of the wedding, when the marriage would traditionally be consummated), demanding that the young couple come to visit him and his wife Savitri instead. Jana, the newlywed man, the *Ci<u>nn</u>a Māpḷē* (younger son-in-law) of the family, played by comedian S. Ve. Shekher, takes offense at the cancellation of his First Night and decides to go to Hyderabad disguised as a cook and teach Dog a lesson. His wife Hema is to follow later once Jana is firmly established in the household.

The jokes in this play point out class stereotypes and push the employer/servant relationship without threatening the status quo because the audience knows (although the family doesn't) that the inversion of roles is false and that the new servant is actually a member of the family and the husband of Hema.

Employers and Servants

There are many perceived dangers inherent in the hiring of servants, and Sara Dickey has identified employers' most common worries with regard to prospective

[20] My interview, May 20, 2004.
[21]Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh State, is a Telugu-speaking area that can be reached by an overnight train from Madras.

employees as including, but certainly not limited to, dirtiness, dishonesty, inappropriate involvement in family conversation, disrespect and subsequent gossip, and theft.[22] Each play manages to address most of these areas, and in the process make a statement about employer-servant relations. In the Natakapriya play, Jana manages to make his employers appear classist, paranoid, cheap, and ignorant. In *Undersecretary,* middle-class pretensions themselves, not the characters, are ridiculed along with the material goods and status symbols that become so important in this play, especially with regard to fancy silk saris and number of servants, continuous points of competition between the two couples and in the elaborate set, complete with plastic flowers in vases and big, intellectual-looking works of English literature.[23]

Undersecretary, by juxtaposing two servant characters, one a "real" servant and one the educated husband in disguise, working together in the household, actually demonstrates how good servants should and should not behave. One of the issues that Dickey mentioned, disrespect and subsequent gossip, can be extended to refer to the characteristic of "loyalty." The real servant Kali is certainly a sympathetic figure, loyal to a fault (the middle-class fantasy servant) and dragged into all sorts of scrapes by his employers' attempts to cover up for Rajamma's lie. When he goes back to his village only to discover that his father is completely healthy, he rushes back to the city to help with the important guests. His employers have decided, however, that with Ramasamy already introduced to the guests as the servant Kali, his presence would be confusing so

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[22] "Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India" in *American Ethnologist* (Vol. 27, No. 2, May, 2000): 462-489, p. 474.

[23] Mankekar, Purnima. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999 discusses signs of being middle class both in terms of what is advertised on television and of the desires of the lower or precariously middle-class families that she worked with.

they give him some money to clear out for the rest of the day, explaining to their guests that his father is deathly ill. This seems like a great idea and an extra day's leave, so Kali goes to the park and plays cards with friends…where he is later "caught" by the guest Gopal and dragged home in disgrace. He puts up a good show, crying and begging not to be fired, thus allowing the "undersecretary" to show his compassion and forgiveness. The impersonator Ramasamy, however, highly annoyed that his wife has forced him into this humiliating situation, is far from the ideal loyal servant, agreeing almost at once to leave the house and go work for Pushpa and Gopal in Delhi for an extra ten rupees a month. Later, when the two "servants" are accused of stealing Gopal's watch, the real Kali politely denies the charges, saying, "I promise. I don't belong to that kind of race. I come from a good family. I've never even seen your watch." He remains loyal, opting to go to the police station rather than to confess his true identity to Gopal and betray his master. Ramasamy, on the other hand, still defiant and sulky, is far from subservient, actually being rude to Gopal, refusing to be questioned or searched, and eventually challenging him with the lie: "It's with me. I won't return it. What will you do?"

While the Ramasamys are lucky to have the model servant Kali working for them, the Narasimhans of *CM-PM* have been struggling to find good servants in Hyderabad. They have contacted their local Tamil Sangam in Hyderabad to ask for assistance in finding a Tamil-speaking cook, necessary after the language difficulties they faced with their previous Telugu-speaking cook. In her essay on servants and their ex-patriate employers in Bangalore, Louise Kidder points out, "Hiring other people to do one's work has the potential for 'communication' problems built into every interaction, especially if

one wants the other person to do it the 'right' way."[24] This communication gap is naturally exacerbated when the employer and servant speak different languages. Knowing this, Jana decides that if Dog Narasimhan wants a Tamil-speaking cook, he'll get a *literary*-Tamil-speaking cook, whom he will likely have trouble understanding. Jana, an educated writer of Tamil dictionaries, is frequently able to confuse his boss by replacing loan words with "pure Tamil."

Language jokes that play on words and slip between Tamil and English, Telugu, and/or Sanskrit continue throughout the play, and often take the form of insubordination between Jana and Dog, his new employer. It is clear from the play that Jana is by far the more educated man of the two, since Dog Narasimhan can't understand Jana's *ilakkaṇa* (literary) Tamil speech. For example, when Dog asks Jana why he hasn't made the coffee like he was supposed to, Jana says that there is no gas, using the Sanskritized form "vāyu" for gas. Dog misunderstands, thinking that Jana is complaining about his "vayiṟu" or stomach. The education levels of the two men represent an inversion of what would normally be the case, where the better-educated man would receive more respect and also be wealthier than the uneducated man (that is, hiring servants, not working as one).

Money and education are certainly the biggest markers of class, but India has also had a history of dividing people based on rules regarding the sharing of food. This hierarchy has been present in India at least from the time of the *dharmasastras* (early Sanskrit law texts) and is still relevant to some extent. *Ciṉṉa Māpiḷē, Periya Māpiḷē* deals with the anxiety about food and the sharing of food in Tamil culture by challenging

[24] Kidder, Louise. "Dependents in the Master's House: When Rock Dulls Scissors." In *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey, 207-220. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, p. 213.

cultural norms. The Narasimhans have complained numerous times to Savitri's father about their difficulties in finding good servants in Hyderabad. The Tanjavore cook requested by the Narasimhans in *CM-PM* would definitely be Brahmin, so the Narasimhans would eat food he cooked and be served by him, but for them to serve the servant food, regardless of his caste status, is an entirely different situation. The first time Dog and Savitri meet Jana, this tension is highlighted and challenged.

When Jana comes to apply for the open cook position, the Narasimhans think that the veshti-clad man entering their home so deferentially is the president of the Hyderabad Tamil Sangam coming to help them locate Tamil-speaking servants, and treat him accordingly. When Jana tries to explain who he really is (pretending to be), knowing from their invitation to come in and sit down that there is some confusion, Dog Narasimhan says, "Who am I? I am an important detective in Hyderabad. I know everything." Jana's momentary fear that his new brother-in-law does in fact know who he is, is betrayed by the shaking in his voice when he says, "Do you know?" but it is quickly relieved. He is not recognized as either the new brother-in-law or the new cook, but as someone else, deserving of great respect. When Dog Narasimhan invites his prospective servant into his home and tells his wife to bring coffee for the man, it is clear that he has no idea what is actually going on. A servant would normally be interviewed outside or just inside the door, not invited in and offered a seat or any refreshment.[25] Jana knows this unspoken rule well and protests, telling Savitri that he won't drink anything, "No coffee, no tea, thank you." So she brings him buttermilk, because she must offer this important guest something, and is puzzled by his response, "As soon as I come, you give buttermilk; you should not repent for that later." To which Dog

[25] Personal conversation with Dr. Sankaran Radhakrishnan, July 2002.

Narasimhan replies, "What is there to repent for later? Nothing." It later comes out that Savitri has brought fresh buttermilk for Jana, not the old buttermilk that she has been serving her husband, and Jana politely offers his buttermilk to Narasimhan. Jana obviously looks uncomfortable and "afraid," so Dog Narasimhan goes overboard in politeness, telling Savitri not to threaten the man and urging Jana to please drink. But when the real president of the Hyderabad Tamil Sangam calls on the telephone, the detective is singing a different song, ordering Jana to get up, using non-respectful verb forms in sharp contrast to his former ingratiating speech. He then turns his wrath on his wife, yelling at her (even though he had told her to do it in the first place) for bringing buttermilk for the servant as though he were a guest.

This sequence touches on the stereotype of employers as petty, making their money off the poor[26] and trying to keep the material differences between themselves and their servants intact. Humorous situations in the play can be subtler than the language jokes, allowing the audience the option of simply laughing at the surface situation but inviting them to think more deeply about the flaws in the social structures that underlie these situations. Jana, to stop the fight, starts to leave, saying that once he earns the negligible cost of a glass of buttermilk he will send them a money order.

The question of food is also important in the Purnam Viswanathan play, but the concern in this case is who can cook for the guests. The servant Kali normally cooks for the Ramasamys, so there would be no problem with his food. However, what should they do in his absence? Most men of Ramasamy's status would not know how to cook and be

[26] See Tolen, Rachel. "Transfers of Knowledge and Privileged Spheres of Practice: Servants and Employers in a Madras Railway Colony." In *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey, 63-86. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000 on moneylending practices between employers and servants.

dependent on their servants or wives even for a simple cup of coffee. So when this clerk is put in the role of a servant and expected to make coffee for the guests, there is something of a crisis. Gopal is too polite to say anything, but he doesn't drink the coffee he is served. Shankar doesn't drink his, either, and makes the excuse that the *other* servant, stressing that they have more than one, usually does the cooking. Rajamma knows that her husband would rebel and reveal his true identity or carry out his threat to just boil whatever he finds in the kitchen and serve it as lunch, spoiling her charade, if she asked him to cook and she certainly can't be seen doing her own cooking, with her class status and guests to entertain, so she decides to order out from a restaurant. Eating food from outside the home is often avoided by wealthy, upper-caste families for both pollution and health reasons, but under these circumstances it seemed to her the only workable solution.

After the buttermilk incident in Shekher's play several more issues are addressed regarding the proper treatment of servants and the duties of the employer in this respect. The Narasimhans have been without satisfactory servants for a long time, except for the driver, who just left that morning. Savitri was upset at the driver because she said he only listened to her husband and didn't think he had to obey her orders. Of course, when Dog Narasimhan asked her why the driver left, she said, entirely self-righteously, that she had asked the man to wash her saris and blouses but he refused to do it and walked out. Among servants, these pampered, middle-class housewives are thought to be very unrealistic and overly demanding. The stereotype of the rich Tamil woman being overly demanding of her servants is funny because of her ignorance of the servant's pride in his work and also of the proper division of labor. Even Dog Narasimhan knows better and is

horrified at her behavior (that she doesn't see anything wrong in) and yells at her, telling her that drivers don't know how to do laundry, and what are they to do now, since he doesn't know how to drive the car.

They decide to take her father's recommendation for a cook and hire Jana, but do ask him a few questions before making that decision final. His responses to their questions are really funny because of their double meanings, speaking both to those who know his true identity (the audience) and those who don't (his new employers) at the same time. For example, he says of his cooking that he will cook like Nala[27] and within half an hour of eating his cooking they will know the result and not be able to sit still, but will be running around saying urgently "Who is the cook? Who is the cook?" The implied meaning is that he will cook so badly that they will be sick and running back and forth to the toilet, subtly inserting into the text references to the power dynamic between servant and employer, reminding the employers in the audience that they are dependent on their cooks' good judgment and graces for their very health. The Narasimhans, however, are so pleased at the thought of having a famous cook like Nala that Savitri says wistfully, "Now, if only we could find a driver just like him, it would be great." This is a wonderful opportunity for Jana, who knows how to drive and by taking this job will be able to pick Hema up at the train station when she arrives and fill her in on how things are going. In addition, it is an opportunity to make Dog Narasimhan dependent on him in a different way. Dog Narasimhan asks him for references, and his response is this long history of drivers in his family:

> Jana: One of my ancestors drove (*ōṭṭu*) the chariot for Arjuna.
> Dog: For Arjuna?

[27] Nala is a dispossessed king in the *Mahabharata* who is a famous cook. When they are separated, his wife Damayanti is able to find and recognize him through his food.

Jana: Yes. We are related to Krishna.
Dog: Ah-ha.
Jana: My great-grandfather drove (*ōṭṭu*) the tonga for the king of Arcot.
Dog: Oh-ho.
Jana: My grandfather drove (*ōṭṭu*) a horse cart on Wall Tax Road.[28]
Dog: Very good.
Jana: My father, when he had no other work, swatted (*ōṭṭu*) flies.
Dog: Ah.
Jana: Now I will drive (*ōṭṭu*) the car for you.
Dog: Very good, very good.

The joke here lies in the use of the same verb (*ōṭṭu*) in wildly different contexts, but the Narasimhans don't seem to notice Jana's last reference to his father and find the resume more than satisfactory, hiring him as both driver and cook on the spot.

Jana continues to create conflict throughout *CM-PM* with his negotiation of wages and a dismissal policy, by sitting too close to his wife, lying about Savitri putting kumkum[29] on his forehead, and being overly friendly with the Narasimhans' distinguished guests. These scenarios highlight potential problems with servants, particularly those with unmarried male servants, yet all take place in a socially acceptable manner within a family. T. D. R., S. Ve. Shekher, and the Natakapriya troupe stretch the boundaries between the social and economic classes in India and remind employers both of their mutually dependent relationship with their servants and of the fact that they are actually not so different from the lower classes, whom they should treat with respect since the consequences of their actions can never be known in advance.

First Night and Dirty Jokes

Shekher also made a point of pushing the boundaries of conservative Brahmin culture by including some characters and jokes in his plays that could be considered vulgar or inappropriate. For example, his 1991 play *Yāmirukku Pāyamēn?* ("Why Fear

[28] A famous street in north Madras city.
[29] Dried and powdered turmeric mixed with slaked lime.

When I am Here?") introduces the character of a young girl who flirts with every guy she sees and acts very immodestly and inappropriately. *CM-PM*, which premiered a mere two years after *Yāmirukku Pāyamēn?*, included several suggestive scenes about the first night of a young couple's marriage.

Shekher's plays, in fact, appeal to younger audiences than most other sabha plays except for, perhaps, Crazy Mohan's. Both of these men have attracted younger members to the sabhas that regularly sponsor their performances. This is atypical, since most sabhas have very few patrons from younger generations. Shekher's audiences tend to be from a younger, more worldly, and less conservative generation than typical sabha-goers. They have grown up with films that promote the idea of an "arranged love marriage," which entails "matrimony between a mutually acceptable and consenting couple that has been facilitated by the couple's parents,"[30] instead of placing the two concepts in direct opposition to one another. Perhaps that is why they are more permissive with their senses of humor and open the space for Shekher to push boundaries and address the traditionally restricted topic of sex. This space is limited, though, and I saw Shekher scold an actress for acting too sexy in a 2003 performance of *Eppovum Nī Rājā* ("You are Always a King"). It is okay for some TV serials, he told her, but drama is directed at families and needs to be clean and modest.

First night provides a special space to discuss sex not only in the theater, but in film as well. In his 2003 book *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology, and Consciousness,* Manjunath Pendakur discusses the various components of a typical "first night" ritual that include not only the flowers, food, and milk mentioned in Shekher's play, but also the centrality of the image of a bed strewn with flowers, the

[30] Definition from www.doubletongued.org.

ritual teasing of the newlyweds before sending them into the room, and the singing of erotic songs outside the room once they are in it. This is the accepted pattern for a first night, but as Pendakur says, "[a]ll these cultural practices stood in contrast to the guarded sexuality of the bourgeois family."[31]

The same year that *Cinna Māpḷē, Periya Māpḷē* was inaugurated, India was rocked by the debate surrounding the sexually suggestive and therefore controversial Hindi song, "Choli ke peeche kya hai?" ("What's behind the blouse"). Monika Mehta has enumerated three distinct voices that emerged from that debate, which are helpful in this discussion of first night. Some opposed the song as morally offensive and therefore contrary to Indian culture. Some defended the song as a traditional folk song sung by women and therefore as an integral part of Indian culture. Third, and most interesting, is the position espoused by Arun Katiyar in an article he wrote for *India Today* in 1994. Monika Mehta quoted this article, in which she said Katiyar

> confirmed that 'folk traditions, especially in Punjab, Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh have spawned wicked lyrics' (Katiyar 1994). However, he added that the songs are sung in *specific contexts* such as pre-wedding ceremonies. In these ceremonies, he explained that when 'women sing what is commonly called ladies' *sangeet* [songs] in Punjab, it is done more in fun than as a come-on' (Katiyar 1994).[32]

The point made here is that although these songs may be "wicked" or vulgar out of context, they are acceptable and "fun" when sung at a pre-wedding ceremony. If this is the case in real life, it makes sense that audiences would feel that sexual innuendo in the specific context of a first night scene in either a film or a play would be more permissible than outside of that context.

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[31] Pendakur, Manjunath. *Indian Popular Cinema: Industry, Ideology and Consciousness.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc., 2003, p. 136.

[32] Mehta, Monika. "What is Behind Film Censorship? The *Khalnayak* Debates." *Jouvert* 5, no.3 (2001): 1-9. Viewed on 1/11/02 at http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v513/mehta.htm, p. 4. Emphasis in original.

Traditionally, the first night of a marriage is when a newly-married couple would first have sex, and their elders have some responsibility to ensure that this happens by preparing the young people adequately. The elders also have a vested interest in the possible outcome of the event: children. The topic of sex, taboo most of the time, is central and auspicious on a first night. In fact, Pendakur writes:

> First night scenes are often used in films as they allow some space to the filmmakers to represent sex. There may or may not be a song in the room. Inclusion of the song prolongs the sexually loaded scene and offers opportunities to the director that may be disallowed by the Censor Board in other situations.[33]

The implication is that even in the eyes of the very strict Indian Censor Board, especially with regard to the topics of sex and modesty, there is something innocent and acceptable about an inexperienced couple preparing for their first night and consummation of their marriage. Regardless of the Censor Board, however, it is certainly true that audiences are much more permissive in their expectations when it comes to song sequences. This is the space for the good Tamil girl to wear western clothes and dance erotically with the hero, since these scenes are often conceptualized as dream or fantasy, and therefore not essential to the plot or reflective of the morality of the character.

CM-PM contains lengthy jokes about the "first night" of a marriage, and the innuendoes in the dialogue are unmistakable. There are two scenes in this particular play that center on the issue of first night, and both are significant in thinking about the clever way that Shekher alludes to the topic of sex while managing to keep the surface level of the conversation "clean," "healthy," and suitable for all ages, concerns that are central to this genre and its audience. The first of these two scenes is just after the marriage, fairly early on in the play, when the groom Jana (played by S. Ve. Shekher) is heading toward

[33] Pendakur 2003, p. 136.

the bedroom on his first night. He is stopped by his new father-in-law, Sonachalam, who tells him the following after a long, suggestive exchange:

> Sona: Son-in-law, one good news.
> Jana: What?
> Sona: First Night cancelled.
> Jana: Huh?
> Sona: *Periya Māppiḷḷai's* order (*uttaravu*).

The implication is that instead of going in to his new wife and beginning their life together with the consummation of their marriage, the young couple is expected to hop on the night train up to Hyderabad to "make *periya māppiḷḷai* happy" (*cantōṣapaṭaṇum*). Jana is incredulous that he is actually expected to forego relations with his new wife Hema on the "order" of the elder son-in-law. He says to his father-in-law:

> What is this? Do I need to go and make the elder son-in-law happy? Are you saying I shouldn't go the distance of ten feet to where your daughter is and make her happy? Do I need to go to Hyderabad and make another man happy?

The sexual undertone of the verb is present because the audience knows exactly where Jana was headed before his father-in-law interrupted him with this news.

Just before Sonachalam tells Jana the "good news," it is made clear that he has not thought about what the marriage of his daughter will mean for her modesty and virginity. He sees his new son-in-law Jana walking by with a *sombu,* a particular size and shape of pot that will be filled with milk for the new couple to drink on their first night, and asks if he is going to the bathroom with it. This opens the floor for a joke about the water shortage in Madras, that Jana may have to use milk to wash himself after going to the toilet, but he then explains himself pretty explicitly to his father-in-law, who immediately announces that first night is cancelled…and calls it "good news." Jana says:

> How can you tease me with a question like this? Today is my first night! In a house with no women it seems like I have to make all the arrangements by

> myself. Oh! Did you put oil in the lamp? Inside, Hema is waiting for me with the pangs of separation.

The scene ends when Hema finally comes out and says, "You're still standing right here talking?! How long do I have to wait for you?" and Jana replies in an angry, rhythmic rant, "You'll need to wait and wilt and shrivel up to nothing. First night cancelled!" This statement of Hema's is one of the very few times a female character says anything even remotely sexually suggestive in a play. Though it is very subtle, it is still noteworthy, since it is far more taboo for a female to make a suggestive comment than a male.

Angry at the older son-in-law Dog Narasimhan "poking his nose into my first night bedroom," Jana headed to Hyderabad to pose as a cook in his brother-in-law Dog Narasimhan's house. Since he is playing the cook, he cannot play his rightful younger son-in-law role, so he enlists his friend Kannan to pose as his wife's police-officer husband. This situation led to the second first night scene, when the elder brother-in-law, thrilled at having a police officer for a brother-in-law, encourages the younger son-in-law imposter to celebrate his "first night" with Hema, his "wife," there in Hyderabad. He continually coaxes, "Please go in, *Māppiḷḷai*, please go," and his "servant" Jana keeps interfering. The audience knows that *he* is the true husband, though Dog believes him to be only a servant.

Dog is making all the preparations for the ritual with milk, flowers, fruit, and the oil lamp when the "servant" asks what the occasion is. When he is told that it is "first night," he asks, deliberately assuming that Dog is talking about his *own* first night, "why have you just been sitting around all these years?" When the elder son-in-law first tells his "servant" that it's "first night", he says "Why didn't anyone tell me?" And when Dog replies, "We need to tell *you* that? What are you going to do?" the response "[a]m I

allowed to say that in your house?" is clearly a reference to the fact that *he*, not the imposter, is the true husband and therefore the girl's first night has everything to do with him. There are then jokes about why Dog doesn't have any children. He believes that his kids will come in a single litter of five or six…just like a dog's, but the most telling moment and one of the funniest sequences in the play is when he describes what the young groom can expect on his first night:

> Dog: *Māppiḷḷai*, Hema will come and fall at your feet.
> Jana: Aaah.
> Dog: Bless her. Take up the *sombu* full of milk. You drink half of it.
> Kan: And the remainder?
> Jana: Make curd out of it.
> Dog: Hey!
> Jana: Okay, okay.
> Dog: Give it to Hema, *Māppiḷḷai*.
> Jana: Oh!
> Dog: Then turn around and look. There will be fruit, snacks, and palm fruit on the table. Don't leave any of it! Eat it all without leaving any leftover. After a short while, you'll get a bit dizzy. Your head will spin. So after putting your head in Hema's lap like that, fall asleep!
> Kan: Is that all?
> Dog: That's all. What else would there be?
> Jana: What is this? Now I see why there are no little critters to be found in this house!

This dialogue, obviously, is full of innuendoes. Anyone in the audience who has already experienced "first night" and many who haven't will know from the language and inflection that the true event of the evening is only briefly alluded to by the word "*mayakkam*" ("stupor," "intoxication") and the references to children.

The scene is tasteful in that it never mentions sex directly, but it is also vulgar on two distinct levels. First, the scene explores the emotions of a man watching his wife (with whom he has not yet had relations) being encouraged to have sex with someone else by her own brother-in-law, but is mitigated by the implication that the brother-in-law

doesn't actually know "the facts of life." Second, it addresses the situation of a man watching his male servant get too close to his newly-married younger sister-in-law. The burden of interpretation, as Shekher claims, can be placed on the audience, but the innuendo is unmistakable, passing only over the heads of the very young.

The sexual tension is also present in the older play *Undersecretary*, in which the cousin playing the role of the husband is put in an awkward position vis-à-vis both his married cousin Rajamma and Kantha, the girl he is trying to court while disguised as another woman's husband. At one point, Shankar scolds Rajamma for speaking to her husband, Ramasamy, who is supposedly her servant, using respectful language. Ramasamy, who is not happy about the way this whole scenario has played out, snaps at this point. He yells at Shankar for calling his wife "darling" and standing too close to her, insisting that Shankar stay at least four steps away from her at all times.

Conclusion

Both *Undersecretary* and *Ci<u>nn</u>a Māpḷē*, *Periya Māpḷē* cleverly exploit the uncomfortable relationship between a middle-class family and their unmarried (or so some of the characters think) male servant. There is opportunity built into each play for rethinking some social and cultural ideas about how servants and employers can and should interact with one another. Servant-employer relations are explored in these plays without crossing any real boundaries since in both cases the middle-class audience members know that the male "servant" is actually the husband in disguise.

The device of the husband in disguise allows the plays to provide humorous situations in which viewers can observe the enacting of ways in which employers and servants should and should not interact. These scenes help to define the boundaries,

particularly the sexual boundaries, between members of these different classes from the standpoint of the middle-class employers, whose class identity in part depends on keeping the social, cultural, and material differences between themselves and their servants intact. The middle-class members of the audience can simply laugh at the humorous surface situations but there are deeper layers in the plays that address underlying social structures and relations.

Ramasamy, for example, is corrected for sounding too intellectual and when he asks Shankar if servants must be idiots, is told that they can be intelligent, but still can't talk back to their employers. Ramasamy (and the audience) suddenly realizes that many servants may be smarter than they are allowed for reasons of cultural propriety to appear. Audiences can take as much or as little from the plays as they like, taking pleasure in fantasy, revenge, storyline, character, theme, or simply in the acting skills of Purnam Viswanathan, S. Ve. Shekher, and their troupe members.

The following chapter looks at a 1968 published play that also offers the added pleasure of literary analysis and more directly tackles issues of social and political relevance. Cho Ramasamy's *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* is part of the sabha genre and shares many characteristics with it, but branches out far enough to cross over into the nationally-known and respected modern drama. My reading of the play helps to further define one of the boundaries of sabha theater.

Chapter Seven

COMEDY AND THE CREATION OF CANON: HOW DOES CHO RAMASAMY FIT INTO THE INDIAN MODERN DRAMA SCENE?

In her comprehensive study of post-Independence Indian drama,[1] Aparna Dharwadker has delineated a canon of modern Indian classic plays, a "'national canon'" as she refers to it that has developed in recent times. Her study of this constructed but constantly-changing and expanding canon is informed by the list of plays and theater practitioners invited to participate in the Nehru Centenary Festival in 1989 as well as years of criticism and published dramas and interviews. Despite the attention afforded to this canon of plays within India, Dharwadker's recent work is one of the first attempts to bring Indian theater into discussions of contemporary world theater. One of the explanations that she offers for the obscurity of Indian theater on the world scene is the "linguistic plurality of Indian theatrical practice."[2] While this is certainly the case, it is also true that the majority of plays recognized as belonging to this developing canon are from only four out of India's many languages and theatrical traditions: Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, and Bengali. In fact, there do not seem to be any Tamil plays or playwrights included.[3] Dharwadker's appendices list major Indian playwrights, plays, directors, and productions, but never once is there anything for Tamil. This is not a language bias on the part of an individual scholar but a serious gap in the history of post-colonial Indian theater and drama, as is evident from the published anthologies of Indian drama.[4]

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[1] Dharwadker, Aparna. *Theatres of Independence: Drama, Theory, and Urban Performance in India Since 1947*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005.
[2] Ibid., p. 2.
[3] With the possible exception of Indira Parthasarathy, who Dharwadker briefly mentions in the context of a list of playwrights.
[4] For example, Deshpande, G. P., ed. *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology*. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000; Mee, Erin, ed. *DramaContemporary: India*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press,

Having spent time in Chennai studying the vital Tamil-language theater traditions and audiences there, I am curious about why these plays, writers, productions, and directors have not become part of what is still in many ways a closed club based in Kolkata, Mumbai, and Delhi. The few Tamil playwrights who have gained national recognition (such as Indira Parthasarathy) tend to have spent time in one of these cities, interacting with "modern" theater practitioners there. They are the same playwrights who have been invited to stage productions at the National School of Drama festival and are therefore possible contenders for "canonicity." Without exception, their plays are serious, not comedic, and address social issues, usually through history or mythology. When they are performed in Chennai, these plays are performed for non-sabha theater audiences.[5] Dharwadker's work makes it clear that although there is a great deal of formal and linguistic diversity in the canon, there is also a set of characteristics that bring these particular plays together.

This chapter attempts to add a different kind of shading to Dharwadker's arguments about the characteristics of the Indian national canon by looking not at the plays that *are* included, but at one that has, as of yet, been excluded. Cho Ramasamy's 1968 Tamil *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* shares more than just a title character with Girish Karnad's 1964 Kannada *Tughlaq*, a play that is firmly within the canon. This comparison of the two South Indian plays from the same political context in terms of both their

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2001; *City Plays.* With an introduction by Mahesh Dattani. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004. Out of all these anthologies, only Deshpande's includes a Tamil play: Indira Parthasarathy's *Aurangzeb.*

[5] Of the 73 performances at the 2004 National School of Drama Theater Festival, there were three Tamil performances: Magic Lantern's translation/adaptation of a Dario Fo play, N. Muthuswamy's *Prahaladha Charitram* directed by Israeli Gil Alon, and Kalairani's *Varukalāmō*, a solo performance in Tamil and English. These were all multi-national performances that had only brief runs in Chennai at the Alliance Francaise, and more critical and international appeal than the regionally insular (and beloved) sabha plays that may remain in a troupe's active repertory for more than fifty years (See National School of Drama's Sixth National Theatre Festival Performance Schedule 2004).

literary and performance histories is instructive in considering the reasoning behind the tacit exclusion of Cho's play (and by extension other Tamil plays) from the accepted canonical lists. This analysis is also an attempt to broaden the established canon by allowing readers access to an otherwise untranslated and inaccessible theatrical tradition. Cho may enjoy a great deal of respect in Chennai, but he is still a comedian and a regional figure as opposed to the internationally recognized Girish Karnad.

Girish Karnad's play is set in the past and tells the story of Mohammad bin Tughlaq's rule as sultan. He holds many ideals at the beginning of the play, but as he becomes more involved in the politics of the country he loses them and grows more and more cynical. From the time he ascends the throne Tughlaq is fighting rumors that he murdered his father and brother during prayer time in order to gain that position. As the story progresses he becomes less and less averse to using deception and subterfuge to continue to rule, eventually masterminding the murders of respected Muslim holy man Imam-ud-din, advisor Shihab-ud-din, and even his beloved step-mother. Parallel to Mohammad bin Tughlaq's story is the narrative of Aziz and Azam, two men who follow the logic of Tughlaq's policies to the extremes and profit from each one. Their actions are a physical expression of the shifting morals of their sultan. The play ends with Tughlaq's recognition of how well he has been understood by the lowly Aziz and his surrender to sleep, which had eluded him for years.

Cho Ramasamy set his play in the present and brought the historical figure of Mohammad bin Tughlaq to 1968. He and his advisor, Ibn Battuta[6] ate some herbs that prevented their deaths, and they remained shut up in a box for six hundred years until history professor Rangachari unearthed them in 1968. Rangachari brings them home to

[6] Ibn Battuta is also a real historical figure. He was a fourteenth-century Islamic scholar and explorer.

his family, which consists of his wife Srimati, their children Pattu and Indira, and Srimati and Rangachary's fathers. After learning about how the country has changed over the six hundred years they slept in the box, Tughlaq decides to run for public office. He quickly rises to become Prime Minister and uses his position to demonstrate the level of ridiculousness and corruption that the Indian government had reached. At the end of the play, Battuta reveals that he and Tughlaq are both imposters, but no one believes him or wants to risk change.

A consideration of Tamil drama and theater can add a lot to the discussion of modern Indian drama, both because it offers a glimpse into what is excluded from the canon and because it gives a sense of a regional theatrical identity and diversity in performance. Tamil theater has its own history and generic branches, as discussed in chapter one, but the tradition of criticism and dramatic theory that sprung up around modern Indian theater simply did not materialize in Chennai. A few writers from the experimental theater such as N. Muthusamy and S. Ramanujam as well as S. Gopalie, an early graduate of the National School of Drama in Delhi, made an effort, but it did not catch on.

Cho Ramasamy

Cho Ramasamy is one of Tamilnadu's most important contemporary playwrights and thinkers. He was born in Chennai in 1934 and studied in Mylapore, then at Loyola College, and in 1955 finished a B.L. degree at Chennai Law College. Cho served as legal advisor for the T.T.K. Company for many years starting in 1960.[7] He started writing dramas in the early 1950s for his younger brother S. Rajagopal (also known as Ambi) and

[7] This information is taken from the book jacket of Ramasamy, Cho. *Ma<u>n</u>am Oru Kuraṅku.* Madras: Alliance, 1997.

a group of his friends from Vivekananda College,[8] but was not part of their Viveka Fine Arts until later. In its early years the group staged plays by Devan and Koothapiran while Cho occasionally played small roles. He was primarily working with Y. G. Parthasarathy's United Amateur Artists at this time and acted opposite J. Jayalalitha in Purnam Viswanathan's *Undersecretary*. In 1958 Koothapiran decided to start his own troupe (Kalki Fine Arts) and Cho found that he had a knack for writing, bringing *If I Get It* to a troupe that was now actively looking for good material. Since then Viveka Fine Arts has exclusively done his plays, and he has had acting roles in every one.

Although Cho's plays are not included as part of the Indian canon by most reckonings, he has received occasional recognition outside of Tamilnadu. Like Komal Swaminathan, whose 1980 play *Taṇṇīr! Taṇṇīr!* (*Water! Water!*) was recently translated into English by S. Shankar, Cho is a crossover playwright in Tamil, and appeals to sabha audiences as well as intellectuals. Shankar describes these plays, "which try to treat high-minded themes in a commercially viable format" and attempt "to straddle the gap between urban and rural audiences, between artistic integrity and popular reach," as part of the "Tamil middle theatre movement."[9]

[8] D. Narayanswamy (also known as Naani), R. Neelakanthan (also known as Neelu), V. R. Srinivasan, J. Muthuswamy, Kathadi Ramamurthy, Sai Srinivasan, P. N. Kumar, and A. N. Radhakrishnan. This list is from the *Viveka Fine Arts Club Golden Jubilee Souvenir*. 2004.

[9] Shankar, S. "*Water! Water!;* A Tamil Play by Komal Swaminathan." *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, No. 2 (Fall 2001): 123-173, pp. 123-4. Shankar wrote in 2001 that "*Water! Water!* is certainly one of the more significant Tamil dramatic works of the twentieth century. It was, in addition, tremendously successful commercially--the most successful of Swaminathan's plays, it has been staged more than two hundred and fifty times and still finds the occasional production, both for urban and rural audiences" (Shankar 2001b, p. 123). None of Swaminathan's plays were performed during the twelve months of my fieldwork, and my understanding is that they have rarely been performed in Chennai since his death in 1995, though the film version of *Water! Water!* directed by K. Balachandar was quite well-known. The publication of Shankar's translation has brought Swaminathan some international recognition, but he is not really on the Tamil scene any longer. Only one audience member cited him as their favorite writer on my survey, as opposed to forty-nine votes for Cho.

Both Cho and Komal Swaminathan are considered by academics to be among the great playwrights in Tamil, though on a somewhat lower level than writers like Indira Parthasarathy and N. Muthusamy because of their more casual (spoken) language and broad appeal.[10] Drama has been, in S. Shankar's words, "the least honored of the different genres in Tamil literary criticism."[11] Shankar cited writer and historian of Tamil literature Mu. Varadarajan as saying that

> There are some valid reasons for neglecting plays in Tamil....Since the Tamil language attained literary stature at a very early stage, it acquired certain rigid literary conventions. It was stipulated that works of literary merit should be written in chaste style devoid of regionalism and colloquialisms. But plays meant for acting were written in spoken but not in literary Tamil. Hence the plays in spoken language were detested by poets and scholars.[12]

This bias is still in evidence, and the more literary a play's language is, the more respected it is in critical circles. R. S. Manohar's plays, for example, are in a much more formal, literary Tamil than those of Cho. The two are the only Tamils mentioned by theater scholar Farley Richmond in a list of "India's leading directors" along with Utpal Dutt, B. V. Karanth, Bansi Kaul, Vijaya Mehta, Arun Mukerjee, Kavalam Narayana Pannikar, M. K. Raina, B. M. Shah, Rudra Prasad Sen Gupta, Habib Tanvir, Ratan Thiyam, Alyque Padamsee, and Pearl Padamsee.[13]

Cho's comedy elicits something in between the respect granted to Indira Parthasarathy and the condescension expressed toward the work of Crazy Mohan. It has led critics like N. S. Jagannathan to simultaneously denigrate and compliment him, who writes, "Now there are political plays of various kinds…We also have, admittedly at the

[10] I am referring here to the diglossic nature of the Tamil language, which is divided into "written" and "spoken" varieties. The politics of this distinction are discussed in greater depth in chapter three.
[11] Shankar 2001b, p. 124.
[12] Cited in Shankar 2001b, p. 124.
[13] Richmond, Farley P. "Characteristics of the Modern Theatre." In *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, edited by Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarrilli, 387-462. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 412.

level of low farce, plays in Tamil by Cho Ramaswami[14] that are extraordinarily effective in the exposure of the corruption of values in Indian politics."[15] "Low farce" or not, S. Shankar described Cho as a "distinguished playwright"[16] in the introduction to his translation of *Water!* and his political opinions and writing skill are well respected by the intellectual community in Tamilnadu. Part of the reason Cho is taken so seriously is that even though he writes in spoken language, he is, unlike most Tamil playwrights, a *writer*[17]—his plays are published as literature and can be read and analyzed whether or not they are performed. In addition to his twenty-three plays Cho has written six novels, many short essays, and the stories for fourteen films and four television programs. He has also directed one film and four television programs in addition to acting in television and in more than 180 films.[18]

Even given this impressive vita, Cho's primary identity is not as a writer or an actor, but as a political commentator. In fact, in a review of Viveka Fine Art's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2004, journalist Arup Chanda wrote, "Cho Ramaswamy is a familiar name, not only in Tamil Nadu but all over India. He is known more as a political commentator who edits a Tamil magazine, *Tughlaq*. But little do people know about Cho as a Tamil dramatist."[19] In a 1982 survey, it was found that 95% of college-educated

[14] Because transliteration from the Tamil is not standardized, there is some variation in the spelling of Cho's name as well as the titles of his plays in various publications in English.
[15] Jagannathan, N.S. "Interview with G.P. Deshpande" in *Contemporary Indian Theatre: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors.* For the Festival of Contemporary Theatre held 3-17 September 1989 for Nehru's Birth Centenary. (New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1989): 103-112, p. 107.
[16] Shankar, S. "Introduction" to *Water!* by Komal Swaminathan, viii-xxxi. Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2001, p. xii.
[17] Most sabha drama writers in Chennai simply put dialogue to someone else's story line. They don't publish their plays, but sell the rights to the troupe, which is then free to make any changes deemed appropriate.
[18] This information is from the book jacket of Cho Ramasamy's *Maṉam Oru Kuraṅku*, 1997.
[19] Chanda, Arup. "Cho Ramaswamy 50 Years of Drama," *Tribune India*, July 11, 2004. Accessed at http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040711/spectrum/main2.htm on August 8, 2006.

adults in Tamilnadu but only 38% of those unable to read had heard of him, and that the vast majority of the population had good opinions about him.[20]

Cho's Plays

Cho's plays are in closer conversation with the modern Indian dramatic tradition than most of the sabha plays, and that is one reason that it is important to consider his work carefully in this context. Another reason is that his plays, though they are dated by their explicit parodies of Dravidian politicians, have somehow stood the test of time and remain very popular in performance. Most sabha troupes have either faded away entirely or have been replaced over the years. Only a few have adapted or somehow managed to remain relevant to the sabha audiences, and Viveka Fine Arts is one. Even in print many of Cho's plays have sold out their first runs and been reprinted. His most famous play, *Mohammad bin Tughlaq*, still brings in packed houses in Chennai when Viveka Fine Arts performs it as a benefit for various charities.

In her criticism of the scant scholarly work available on post-colonial theater, Aparna Dharwadker makes two very important points. First, that "[f]or certain social groups in India…the colonial experience was one of privilege rather than subordination."[21] Most sabha theater practitioners fall into this category. Cho, for example, is at least a third-generation lawyer. Second, the majority of post-Independence theater practitioners were self-consciously trying to develop "a 'new' theatre for a new nation,"[22] writing about "the intersecting structures of home, family, and nation in the urban society of the present,"[23] not about the colonial encounter. Like many of the

[20] http://www.cmi.ac.in/gift/Surveys/surv_relative.htm, accessed May 23, 2006.
[21] Dharwadker 2005, p. 11.
[22] Ibid., p. 13.
[23] Ibid., p. 11.

modern playwrights whom Dharwadker discusses, Cho's emphasis is on the "postcolonial present" and his observation skills are the key to his success. He did not, however, employ realism to show Indian families and politics exactly as they were, but rather used satire and hyperbole to indicate the general direction in which he saw the family and nation to be headed.

This "shift from heroic self-praise to ironic self-reflexivity"[24] was common among urban writers of the post-colonial period, and the increased use of irony and satire has been continually noted in discourses about India:

> [T]he issues of colonialist (mis) representation, nationalist reaction, and postcolonial revision can instead be subsumed within the dialectic of 'satiric' and 'heroic' discourses that has shaped European *and* Indian constructions of India since the late eighteenth century.[25]

These post-colonial playwrights continued the colonial trend of revising the Indian epics to comment on the nation's political situation. Dharwadker is here discussing ironic and satiric plays that are *serious.* Satire, however, is a device that can also be very funny and as such it is used in Tamil drama to great effect by Cho Ramasamy.

Cho started his hobby by writing short comic skits for his brother and his friends in 1954, but didn't pen explicitly political plays until ten years later. His early plays were more in the style of social comedies. For example, his 1964 *Maṉam Oru Kuraṅku* (*The Mind is a Monkey*) is a Tamil adaptation of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* that pokes fun at the pretensions of the Indian middle class. These first plays were not overtly political and the audiences grew to love his keen sense of observation and his fast-paced dialogue. Cho was branded as a great comic writer several years before he started writing the political satire for which he eventually became known.

[24] Ibid., pp. 180-1.
[25] Ibid., p. 172.

It was his *Campavāmi Yukē Yukē,* which also came out in 1964, that first brought Cho his fame as a political satirist. The title of the play is a line from the *Bhagavad Gītā,* and in the play, corruption is so rampant that Vishnu (as Krishna) is arrested and brought to court on a charge of murder. Sage Narada tells him that he can escape if he bribes the judge. This play was banned by the police because one of the character's names was actually the name of a real employee of the transport department who was concurrently in the news for his corrupt practice of accepting bribes.[26] Cho was asked to remove some sections and change the name of the character, but he refused and instead brought all his legal genius to bear on the court case. The case got a lot of press and went on for a month before Cho won. By then the audiences were lining up to see this play with its subversive reputation.

Over the next few years Cho developed his political satire and created the character of Mohammad bin Tughlaq with whom he has come to be identified. He wrote his most famous play, *Mohammad bin Tughlaq,* in 1968. It was made into a film in 1970, the same year he started his *Tughlaq* journal[27] through which he became known as a political commentator. The journal was started with the idea of criticizing whichever government happened to be in power as well as all politicians, candidates, and policy initiatives. In one of his early issues Cho wrote in the "Dear Mister *Vācakarē…!*" section that it is his duty to be the opposition: "[b]ut, while telling it that way, I made it clear that I tell my personal opinion independent of affiliation with any party. Whichever party comes to rule, it is my responsibility to serve as the opposition party. 'Tughlaq's way is

[26] My interview with R. Neelakanthan, October 29, 2003.
[27] *Tughlaq* has recently become available online at www.thuglak.com/thuglak/.

my way.'" [28] He wanted to make sure that the public knew about the issues and their options in elections, so he began each issue with an *eccarikkai* (warning). Cho spent his life criticizing politicians, then became one himself as a member of the national government's Rajya Sabha, only recently retiring from that work.

The Tughlaq of Cho's play exploits the importance of name recognition in politics. There is a great deal of slippage between the identities of stars and politicians, who are so often the same. Cho himself, though he served for many years in the Rajya Sabha, is not considered a "politician" by many people because his position was an appointed, not an elected one. Although he voted on issues and was part of the Central Government, Cho never ran for office. This campaigning is where he finds politicians to be the most corrupt. His play *Iṉpakkanā Oṉṟu Kaṇṭēṉ* (*I Dreamed a Sweet Dream*) is the story of a utopian community where everyone has a role and gets along beautifully until there are two candidates for one position. The resulting election leads to corruption and a complete disintegration of all the values of the society. Politicians, in Cho's view, tell the people whatever they think they want to hear, then ignore or renege on all campaign promises.

Indian Political Satire

Cho's political satire came at a very timely moment in the history of both India and Tamilnadu, though using drama as a political tool was not a new technique in either context. Nandi Bhatia argued with reference to plays like *Nil Darpan* ("The Indigo Mirror"), *Gajadananda Prahasan* ("Gajadananda and the Prince"), and *Chakur Durpan* ("The Tea Planters' Mirror") that by the late nineteenth century,

[28] *"Āṉāl, appaṭik kūṟum pōtē, 'nāṉ kaṭci cārpaṟṟa muṟaiyil taṉippaṭṭa eṉ apippirāyattait taāṉ kūṟukiṟēṉ. Ekkaṭci āṭcikku vantālum poṟuppuḷḷa 'etirk kaṭciyākap paṇiyāṟuvathē tukḷakkiṉ vaḷi—en vaḷi' eṉṟum teḷivākak kūṟiyirukkiṟēṉ."* March 15, 1971, p. 4.

> theater in India had indeed become an expression of political struggle against colonial rule and a space for staging scathing critiques of the oppression and atrocities inflicted upon colonial subjects by rulers…[29].

In response to this tendency, the British government passed the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act in 1876. This led to the popular trend of staging representations of the *Mahābhārata* and other mythological stories in order to comment on sociopolitical events, "elude censorship and at the same time disseminate nationalist ideas."[30] The British, not wanting to interfere with religious performances, had a much harder time preventing the staging of these plays[31] than those not based on religious stories. Audiences were familiar with the mythological subjects and "alert to their accumulated meanings, associations, and resonances,"[32] but the British officials were not. Although they slowly decoded the political messages and banned production and publication, "the authors' allegorical strategies—at the minimum—bought enough time to propagate their ideas of cultural and political resistance for varying periods of time, and on occasion, to defend themselves successfully against the routine charges of sedition."[33]

The use of the theatrical stage to spread nationalist messages seems to have reached the Madras Presidency quite late by comparison. What was taking place on Bengali and Marathi stages in the late 1870s didn't happen in Madras until the early 1920s with the work of S. Sathyamurthy, Suthanandha Bharathi, and Subramanya Siva. Their efforts were in response to particular events such as the Tinnevelly Sedition Case,

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[29] Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 1.
[30] Ibid., p. 43.
[31] One example, discussed in detail by Rakesh Solomon (in "Culture, Imperialism, and Nationalist Resistance: Performance in Colonial India." *Theatre Journal* 46 (1994): 323-347), is the Marathi play *Kichaka-Vadha* by Khadilker, which is a reading of the *Mahābhārata* story of the death of Kichaka that portrays the Gokhale-Tilak debate with Lord Curzon (Viceroy) as Kichaka.
[32] Solomon 1994, p. 327.
[33] Ibid., p. 326.

the Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the Non-Cooperation Movement.[34] According to S. Theodore Baskaran, nationalist plays in Madras then declined in the late 1920s and only revived with the next "wave of political activism" that started with the execution of Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries in 1931. This event led to plays such as *Desa Bhakthi* (*Patriotism*) staged by the Bala Shanmugananda Sabha and *Khaddarin Vetri* (*The Victory of Khadi*) staged by the T. K. S. Brothers.

Tamil actors were directly involved in political activity *off* stage from as early as the 1928 founding of the Tamilnadu Nadikar Sangam (Tamil Actors Association) which provided "an organizational framework for the political involvement of drama artistes."[35] They resolved at a conference in December of 1931 "to give all assistance to the Congress and to intensify nationalistic propaganda through the stage,"[36] to which the government responded by requiring all dramas to receive permission from the district authorities before they could be staged. After the end of World War II and the promise of independence, nationalism disappeared as a subject of dramas. Most of the drama companies folded and the personnel left for the cinema.

After the excitement about independence and the celebration of Indian culture that followed in the 1950s, the country's political atmosphere became more complex. The Congress Party, flush with the victory against the British and with the reputations of Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru to rest on, led the country in what amounted to a one-party system for a while. Nehru was the Prime Minister of India until his death in 1964, and the end of his term was fraught with incidents that called into question

[34] See Baskaran, S. Theodore. *The Message Bearers: The Nationalist Politics and the* Entertainment Media in South India 1880-1945. Madras: Cre-A, 1981, pp. 29ff. for details.
[35] Ibid., p. 38.
[36] Ibid.

India's moral superiority over the West as well as its policy of non-alignment. The early 1960s saw both a war between India and China and the invasion of Portuguese Goa by the Indian army.

The National Congress Party, after Nehru's death, had a bit of a succession crisis. Nehru named Lal Bahadur Shastri as the next Prime Minister, but Shastri only lived a few years after Nehru's death. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, took over leadership, but split the party in the process. In addition to all of this confusion, the country was still very new and trying to address issues that had not yet been satisfactorily resolved such as reservations for disadvantaged communities and disputes over state borders. All of the turmoil invited commentary on the government and political situation, a charge taken up enthusiastically by dramatists all over the country.

The tenor of political drama changed during this period. The political personalities of the individual states that had been developing during Nehru's rule were clearly visible in the 1960s. These personalities influenced the types of dramas that were performed in different regions. As Communism gained support in West Bengal, for example, the traditional jatra theatrical form characterized by mythological and historical themes transformed into a social genre in the early 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s jatra plays with titles such as *Marx, Lenin, Hitler*, and *Vietnam* were produced.[37]

The Dravidian movement in Tamilnadu began much earlier, as discussed in chapter three, but it was in the 1960s that it truly gained momentum and its candidates actually started winning elections. Sabha audiences in Chennai were ripe for political

[37] Sengupta, Rudraprasad. "Viability of Professional Theatre in West Bengal Today." *Sangeet Natak Akademi.* December 1984, p. 5. He writes that this trend was over by the early 1980s and the jatras were once again mythological and pseudo-historical, though popular as ever. Coincidentally, Cho Ramasamy wrote his last play in 1982.

satire, and Cho Ramasamy went about it in exactly the right way, striking a chord with the population of a highly politically-literate state. The voting rate is very high[38] in Tamilnadu and people pay attention to politics and the issues, in part because of the close ties in the state between politics and the media.

Politics and the dramatic arts have been especially closely linked in Tamilnadu, even in comparison to most other Indian states. As mentioned before, former Chief Minister C. N. Annadurai was a writer. This is also true of current Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. Former Chief Ministers M. G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalitha were both famous actors. There is a real theatricality to Tamil politics that influences both the press and the actions of the players. Certainly all politicians are public people who know that they are in the public eye and stage various statements or actions with this in mind. But in Tamilnadu, the politicians, including Cho himself, who served several terms in the Rajya Sabha in Delhi, are actually professionals, or at the very least experienced amateurs, in the drama and cinema fields.[39]

One recent example of the theatricality of Tamil politics was the circumstances surrounding the arrest of DMK leader M. Karunanidhi in 2001. Tamil political parties are also affiliated with particular television channels. Karunanidhi's DMK was closely affiliated with Sun TV,[40] while J. Jayalalitha, the AIADMK leader, owns Jaya TV. The

[38] In the May 2006 elections, for example, voter turnout was an average of seventy-three percent in the representative Tiruchi District (see Ganesan, S. "Average Voter Turnout 73 Per Cent in Tiruchi District." *The Hindu*, May 10, 2006).

[39] M. S. S. Pandian has written a wonderful book *called The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* that shows how the politician used his film image to endear himself to particular populations and to promote his policies. (Pandian, M. S. S. *The Image Trap: M. G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics.* New Delhi: Sage, 1992.)

[40] Sun TV was the "official channel of the DMK party" (*Asian Tribune*, "Tamilnadu Chief Karunanidhi to Launch Kalaignar TV Channel," May 22, 2007) until a feud between Karunanidhi (also known as "Kalaignar" or "artist") and his close family allies and long-time supporters the Maran brothers, who own the Sun TV network. On June 3, 2007, Karunanidhi's 83rd birthday, the Raj TV network officially

coverage of the arrest by these two channels was comic, to say the very least. Sun TV had a tape of Karunanidhi (complete with sunglasses) being dragged from his apartment at midnight by police running on a loop. Jaya TV, on the other hand, chose to screen some old movies featuring Jayalalitha herself as a beautiful young woman with the very popular late Chief Minister M. G. Ramachandran as her leading man.

The trend of using the media to reach the people that started with dramatic troupes only intensified with the rise of the film industry and the contesting of elections by Dravidian political parties. Cinema was a cheap way to get maximum exposure for party agendas and the DMK in particular took advantage of actors and writers in its political campaigning. C. N. Annadurai, then leader of the party, was a writer, director, and producer who did many "openly propagandistic" films, to use Robert Hardgrave's terminology. The DMK won the Tamilnadu state elections in 1967 and Annadurai became Chief Minister. He died early in 1969, but the party still had plenty of support for its agendas and the film personnel to help promote them. Social reforms were a priority, though political scientist Marguerite Ross Barnett would argue that was at least partly by default. The language question, as she rightly pointed out, could not have been solved at the state level and the DMK had never made labor a priority, but "[s]ocial reform was both important to the party and a workable issue."[41] Barnett lists untouchability and Adi-Dravida welfare; religious reform, anti-Hinduism, "anti-superstition;" and secularism as the top three priorities of the new DMK government.

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announced that they will launch "Kalaignar TV," with its rising sun logo an exact match of the DMK party logo. The new channel will be in direct competition with Sun TV.

[41] Barnett, Marguerite Ross. *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 263.

Although Cho addressed all of these issues in one drama or another, his top priority was exposing corruption, especially within the DMK government itself.

R. Neelakanthan, an actor who has been with Viveka Fine Arts from the beginning, told me a story about a 1970 play of Cho's called *Enṟu Taṉiyum Inta Cutantira Tākam?,* which is a line from the nationalist poet Bharatiyar's poem that he translated as "[w]hen will we be released from thirst for independence?" The play was a grand success partly because it was highly critical of the ruling DMK government. The Congress Party and other opposition parties would arrange for the play to be performed at public meetings, to which Neelu said that goondas and rowdies would come from the DMK with eggs, cycle chains, and the like to frighten the artists. Madras City was fairly safe but outside the city the actors needed police protection to stage the play. For the first time in Tamilnadu's history, drama tickets sold on the black market at double their face value. The play was so popular that DMK leader M. Karunanidhi tried to counter with a play ridiculing Cho called *Nāṉē Aṟivāḷi* ("I am a Most Intelligent Person") that featured Cho as a buffoon. Karunanidhi's play, according to Neelu, was a failure and was only staged two or three times.[42]

Cho's play *Tughlaq* parodies Dravidian politicians, but moves beyond that narrow scope to poke fun at politicians from all parties as well as students, women, heads of household, brahminism, and democracies in general. It is an exhortation to the people, the voters, to care about who is running their country and making decisions that affect their lives. *Tughlaq* shows the impact of policies on ordinary people and reminds viewers and readers that these things *do* matter. The most cutting criticism that the play makes is that people don't think. They don't force politicians to give them options. And

[42] From my interview with Neelu, April 14, 2004.

when there are no options, and it really doesn't make a practical difference who is running the government, then the people are right to be apathetic. In response to one of the politicians in the play wondering how the people will react to some crazy policies the Tughlaq government is pushing, Tughlaq's confidante and advisor Ibn Battuta says:

> They will think, "If this government goes, what will the next government do for us?" Do you think that the people support us thinking that we are doing something for the country's well-being? "No matter what government comes we will have the same fate." Having thought this, these people won't say anything, just "Let them be in the position…." Only if the people *think* will a good government be formed. Until people realize that, there is no reason for people like us to worry.[43]

This defeatist attitude can sabotage a country and invite corruption, and it is clear that Cho wants his fellow citizens to take their part in India's democracy seriously and not underestimate their importance.

The Two Tughlaqs

The main part of the historical Mohammad bin Tughlaq's story that Cho adopted as the basis for his character is the fact that he changed his capital from Delhi to Devagiri/Daulatabad and then back to Delhi. The character of Mohammad bin Tughlaq is someone who can change his mind at a moment's notice and not feel the need to consult anyone, let alone explain or justify himself, which is Cho's cynical vision of most politicians. The Ibn Battuta of the play has no problem with Tughlaq's changing the capital; his problem is with the forced move of the population to the new capital. Cho's Tughlaq has no regrets about these orders and atrocities (*akkiramaṅkaḷ*), as the traitor Asansha calls them, and is very flippant about the loss of life en route. He is concerned

[43] Ramasamy, Cho. *Mohammad bin Tughlaq*. [in Tamil] 2nd Printing. Madras: Alliance, 1995. Translated by Kristen Rudisill as *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* (Unpublished manuscript, 2001), p. 52.

only with his own image and justifies the tragedy to scholar Ibn Battuta by citing "population control"[44] as the "gain for the nation" in all of the shifting:

> Batt: You can move the capital if you want. But why did you tell the people of Delhi to go to Devagiri?
>
> Tugh: Shouldn't there be people in Devagiri?
>
> Batt: Then why did you tell all the Delhi people who were going to Devagiri to go back to Delhi again?
>
> Tugh: There wasn't enough food for them to reach Devagiri, and they had started to die. So I said that if they wanted to they could return to Delhi.
>
> Batt: Was there enough food for them to return to Delhi?
>
> Tugh: No. But then they died while returning.
>
> Batt: But then why did you tell them to return? They were going to die either way. You could have told them to go to Devagiri!
>
> Tugh: Therein you will see the brilliance of Mohammad bin Tughlaq! If they had died on the way to Devagiri, people would say that they died following the sultan's wishes. But if they died on the way to Delhi, I had told them to go if they *wanted* to. So I can say that they died *then*, doing as they wished.
>
> Batt: In trying to change the capital, the people died. What is the gain for the nation in that?
>
> Tugh: The population is reduced.[45]

The flippancy and unconcern of Cho's Tughlaq is diametrically opposed to Karnad's Tughlaq and his reasoning for the change of capital. He says that he is changing the capital in order to "light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace—not just peace but a more purposeful life."[46] He explains the

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[44] Cho makes a similar joke in *Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai* when the doctor says that he himself uses traditional medicines but prescribes western medicine to his patients so that they will die and the population will be controlled.

[45] Ramasamy, Cho. *Mohammad bin Tughlaq.* [in Tamil] 2nd Printing. Madras: Alliance, 1995. Translated by Kristen Rudisill as *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* (Unpublished manuscript, 2001), pp. 8-9.

[46] Karnad, Girish. *Three Plays: Naga-Mandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 149.

decision in detail to his subjects, and explicitly tells them that they have the option to stay in Delhi, though one of the men in the audience immediately refers to the capital shift as "Tyranny! Sheer tyranny!"[47] Tughlaq's response to this addresses the relevant contemporary issue of communal relations, something that Cho's Tughlaq never addresses or worries about:

> I beg you to realize that this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after careful thought and discussion. My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and as you well know its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad. This is only an invitation and not an order. Only those who have faith in me may come with me. With their help I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world.[48]

Never does Cho's Tughlaq display the sort of reasoning, character development, and internal struggle that forms the basis of Karnad's play. Karnad's Tughlaq is, in many ways, an idealist. He says to his advisors at one point, "[w]hat hopes I had built up when I came to the throne! I had wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to become a further step in knowledge, every step to lead us nearer to God."[49] Over the course of the play we watch his descent into madness.

Cho's play, far from Karnad's serious, tragic story, has a ridiculous premise and jokes throughout to keep the audience laughing. His story is that Mohammad bin Tughlaq and scholar Ibn Battuta took some herbs in the fourteenth century that prevented their deaths. As soon as Tughlaq and Battuta, in their box, are dug out of the ground by history professor Rangachari during his 1968 archaeological excavation, Tughlaq decides

[47] Ibid., p. 149.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 186.

to take his dictator-like ruling strategy and see how it will work in a democracy. The opening scene, in the durbar of the historical Tughlaq, functions as an exposé of his character and policy. The stories first mentioned in this scene (movement of the capital, leather currency, summary execution of political opponents, and so on) are the ones that are later exploited by Tughlaq in his bid for power in the India of 1968. Tughlaq learns through his experiment that people will vote for a dictator.

It is not until the very last scene of the play that Cho brings the readers back into the realm of reality by revealing that these two men were actually just regular guys who faked their own deaths in order to impersonate the historical figures of Tughlaq and Ibn Battuta and through them teach the country a lesson. The lesson, as "Battuta" put it, "was to show these citizens just how easily they could be deceived,"[50] but it never gets across. We, the spectators, have seen how easily everyone was deceived, but the level of deception is so deep that the characters never see it themselves and never learn the lesson.

The theme of impersonation is central to both Cho's and Karnad's plays. Karnad's play includes a clown character, Aziz, that functions as a foil to Tughlaq. Aziz raises his status throughout the play, beginning life as a Muslim dhobi, then becoming a Brahmin, then a Muslim saint, and finally an officer of the army. Cho's Mohammad bin Tughlaq is actually an impersonation by a poor orphan who rises quickly to become the Prime Minister of India. Neither has any desire to give up his new status and the power that goes along with it. Aziz doesn't deny his low status when he talks to the sultan, but he certainly doesn't want to go back to it. Cho's Tughlaq won't even acknowledge his previous identity to his friend and fellow impersonator, continuing to call him Ibn Battuta to the end of the play:

[50] Ramasamy (Rudisill translation 2001), pp. 56-7.

Ibn: Battuta…what is this?....Battuta…Call me Raghavan. After acting and acting as Tughlaq have you become him?

Tugh: Yes. As far as I am concerned, you are Battuta himself. And I am Tughlaq.

Ibn: What are you saying?

Tugh: After much thought we have done all this. But now I am the Prime Minister. If I say I'm not Tughlaq, then I won't be Prime Minister, either.

Ibn: So…

Tugh: I have decided to continue to live as Tughlaq.

Ibn: Mahadevan…

Tugh: Mohammad bin Tughlaq.

Ibn: Hey! What is this injustice? When we started all this we made a vow at the Kali temple. Don't consider betraying the goddess…Mahadevan.

Tugh: If you call me Mahadevan one more time, you will invoke Mohammad bin Tughlaq's wrath.

Ibn: Hey! Mahadevan!

Tugh: I am not Mahadevan! Call me Mohammad bin Tughlaq. I am Mohammad bin Tughlaq, the Honorable Prime Minister of the sovereign Democratic Republic of India. Elected by the people, for the people, and working for the people.[51]

The politicians in Cho's play know that it is necessary for Tughlaq to be Tughlaq in order for their own power to remain intact. That is enough for them to kill any notions to the contrary, and Battuta, after revealing the original scheme to the people, is dismissed as crazy, his mind having cracked in the heat of Delhi. He is shouted down and the play ends with shouts of "Long Live Tughlaq! Long Live Tughlaq!"

Cho Ramasamy, though not a revolutionary or self-described realist, sees the humor of the current political situation, allowing viewers/readers to both laugh and

[51] Ibid., p. 57.

realize how scarily close to reality these scenes are. He critiques society and politicians ruthlessly, but *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* still holds out some hope for democracy. The fifth scene of the play parodies all major parties in the context of a public meeting called to convince people to vote for the "all party alignment" candidate against Tughlaq. None of the candidates' parties are given by name, but they are transparent from the candidates' names and the speeches that they make. Govind (from the Congress) invokes Independence and says that they should win because they went to jail and have been known to the people for a long time. Sastri is obviously a Hindu nationalist entreating the people to study the *Bhagavad Gītā* and follow their dharma, throwing in a line about how he doesn't know much Tamil. Velayuttam is the communist, making the argument that Tughlaq is an imperialist and will therefore be against the workers. Mr. Tyagarajan is the Dravidian politician, speaking eloquently and at length about how this land is the land of Kannaki. These politicians, we can surmise, would make the same speeches no matter what the occasion. At the end of each performance Cho makes a statement about the way politics have remained so corrupt and farcical that his plays are still relevant after all this time. He thanks politicians for that.

The two Tughlaq plays were very much of the same time, but they have different approaches and focus on different issues through their images of the same historical figure. Karnad has written a historical play that alluded to the contemporary national political situation, an interpretation that was voiced by author U. R. Anantha Murthy, who in his introduction to the play wrote that "[a]nother reason for *Tughlaq's* appeal to Indian audiences is that it is a play of the sixties, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in

the country."[52] Cho's play was also designed to reflect the issues and political mood of the 1960s, but in Tamilnadu in particular. The snapshots of politics Cho takes in scene five are funny, and would be to all Indians, but Tyagarajan is specific to Tamilnadu. This type of character and the insider joke about his flowery language may be partly why Cho the dramatist is still only a regional figure.

Cho's *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* is set in 1968 and addresses a number of regional and national issues over the course of the play. Some of these issues (corruption, national language, food shortages, unemployment, state border issues, and foreign policy) are directly confronted in the context of Tughlaq's meetings with various ministers in his government. Others, such as strikes, arranged marriage, sex education, and respect within the family, are indirectly addressed through the actions and interactions of Professor Rangachari and his family. Both Tughlaq plays addressed the political situation in the India of the mid- to late 1960s, but both have also been prescient to some extent and remained relevant forty years later.

Farce, Satire, Psychodrama, and Tragedy

Cho's plays, which are not leftist, realistic, or necessarily progressive, as are most plays of the modern Indian dramatic canon, have been alternately described as "political satire" and "farce," terms that have different meanings and connotations, but are often linked in critical thought as well as in practice. There is a lot of overlap between the two concepts, but the major difference is that satire involves wit or humor and an object of attack. The satirist takes a high moral line and assumes "a special function of analysis, that is, of breaking up the lumber of stereotypes, fossilized beliefs, superstitious terrors, crank theories, pedantic dogmatisms, oppressive fashions, and all other things that

[52] Karnad 1994, p. 143.

impede the free movement of society."[53] Satire is associated with George Meredith's idea of "high comedy," which "evokes 'intellectual laughter'—laughter from spectators who remain emotionally detached from the action—at the spectacle of human folly and incongruity," while farce is associated with "low comedy," which "makes no intellectual appeal, but depends for its comic effect on violent and boisterous action, or slapstick."[54]

Both satire and farce are routinely used to address serious issues and comment on politics. In his work on plays dealing with communism in Kerala, Darren C. Zook writes that politics are themselves so comical that even realistic dramatic portrayals of them are necessarily farces:

> Political practice and rhetoric have become so comical and absurd that left-wing, socialist, and 'realist' dramas, if they are true to their task of representing the revolution as it is, must unwittingly and perhaps unwillingly tend toward a theatre of revolutionary farce (or farcical revolution)—or, indeed, a theatre in which farce and realism are indistinguishable.[55]

In contrast to this view are the many serious plays such as Komal Swaminathan's *Water! Water!* and Mahasweta Devi's *Mother of 1084* that have their roots in leftist politics. Zook accounts for Karnad's *Tughlaq* by arguing that

> Karnad's play is not an antidrama but a complex farce (*prahasana vinod*) in which 'serious' political rule becomes increasingly indistinguishable from political charade and brute force masquerades as idealism in the hands of Muhammad Tughlaq, a fourteenth-century monarch of northern India.[56]

It is true that there are farcical scenes in Karnad's *Tughlaq*, but those scenes are part of what Karnad envisioned as the light, "shallow" comedy scenes interspersed with the drama of the main characters and their "deep" scenes, a technique he borrowed from the

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[53] Northrup Frye 1944 in Allen, Charles A. and George D. Stephens, eds. *Satire: Theory and Practice* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1962, pp. 19-20.
[54] Meyer H. Abrams 1941 in Allen 1962, pp. 39-40.
[55] Zook, Darren C. "The Farcical Mosaic: The Changing Masks of Political Theatre in Contemporary India." *Asian Theatre Journal* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 174-199, p. 176.
[56] Ibid., p. 188.

Parsi theater. Aparna Dharwadker calls Karnad's *Tughlaq* a "psychodrama"[57] and talks about the "political and psychological ironies"[58] in the play, and that assessment seems much closer to the nature of Karnad's play than the designation "farce." It could also be read as a tragedy in a Shakespearean sense because the play never goes so far as to fit Northrup Frye's definition of "concentrated" satire where the tragedy is "robbed of all its dignity and nobility."[59]

Darren Zook does rightly understand that at the end of Karnad's play the clown (Aziz) and the king (Tughlaq) become impossible to distinguish from one another, and therein lies the farce:

> The clown does not merely imitate the king—part of the power of farce is in recognizing the clown and the king as separate characters—but in fact elides with the king: the clown becomes the king and the king becomes the clown. And in that moment the possibility of clowning, or even of laughter, disappears.[60]

He writes that he uses this example of Karnad's play in order to demonstrate that any political theater must be farcical, even outside of the Communist context of Kerala:

> The point here is to show that even outside the charged context of revolutionary, leftist theatre in Kerala, the subversive and political potential for laughter has been denied through its co-optation and inclusion in the words and deeds of the state—here represented by analogy through the character of Tughlaq. The nonsensical reasoning through which Aziz, as the clown, justifies his heinous actions turns out to be synonymous with the reasoning through which Tughlaq has pursued his own political intrigues: government action is itself a farce.[61]

The tragic figure of Girish Karnad's character Tughlaq does not fit into Meyer Abrams' definition of farce as "a type of comedy in which one-dimensional characters are put into ludicrous situations, while ordinary standards of probability in motivation and event are

[57] Dharwadker 2005, p. 247.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Frye 1944 in Allen 1962, p. 28.
[60] Zook 2001, p. 189.
[61] Ibid.

freely violated in order to evoke the maximum laughter from an audience,"[62] though his minor character Aziz might.

Unlike Karnad's, Cho's play never separates the king and the clown. There is only Mohammad bin Tughlaq the clown/sultan. There is no psychodrama, no character development, no "deep" scenes. Still, neither theatrical category quite encompasses Cho's *Mohammad bin Tughlaq,* which stands at the intersection of farce and satire. It has the one-dimensional characters and nonsensical reasoning of farce combined with the incisive wit and corrective morals of the political satire. Choice of descriptive terms does, however, make a difference in the minds of readers and viewers. Farce is usually considered "low" and satire "high" in the entertainment hierarchy. The use of the word "farce" makes Cho's work seem light and insubstantial, while "satire" praises him as a political thinker and mover.

The discussion about what to do about the national language issue in scene seven is an excellent case in which Cho's ridiculous scenario is obviously close to the true political situation, and the solution he poses can be read as farcical, but it does force the audience to think about the issue. The premise is that Tughlaq is learning the history of the past 600 years cold, then running the country. He asks some of his many Deputy Prime Ministers[63] to explain their positions on the issue, and while his responses and ultimate solution are comical, the arguments are pretty much exactly what the country was hearing from politicians in 1968.

[62] Abrams 1941 in Allen 1962, p. 39-40.
[63] Tughlaq promised that any Members of Parliament that joined his party would be appointed Deputy Prime Minister. This resulted in Tughlaq's government boasting one Prime Minister and a total of 450 Deputy Prime Ministers.

Govind, the Congress parody, says there is no issue: Hindi is the obvious choice. The political spin on this is that the majority of the country (and therefore the voters, especially in his region) speak Hindi, and they need to be appeased. The Communist says English is out of the question because it's foreign and "[w]e need to speak only in our mother tongue."[64] This raises the obvious objection that Indians have many "mother tongues," so why should some get priority over others? Cho has Tughlaq voice a ridiculous solution to the problem that answers this objection: have a different national language each month, which doesn't give any single one priority over the others. The question of priority leads to the Dravidian representative saying that if we're going to give one mother tongue priority, let's make it Tamil, since that happens to be *his* mother tongue. Sastri, of course, tries to unite the country under Sanskrit, which has the obvious disadvantage of not really being a spoken language. Govind raises another objection to English, which is the fact that South Indians have an advantage in that language over those whose mother tongue is Hindi. Tyagarajan points out that if Hindi were the national language then Hindi speakers would have an advantage over South Indians. After weighing all of these concerns, which have no perfect compromise, and therefore haven't really been satisfactorily solved in the real world, where English and Hindi are both considered "national languages," Tughlaq decides to make Persian the new national language. His rationale is that

> Hindi speakers need to learn some new language. At the same time it cannot be a language that South Indians know. We need to adopt some language like that as the national language. Therefore, let us take Persian as the national language. That solves the language problem.[65]

[64] Ramasamy (Rudisill translation 2001), p. 40.
[65] Ibid., p. 41.

The satire addresses all concerns, but does not take the issue or its real-world consequences seriously. It does not offer a feasible solution to a problem that was very contentious in the late 1960s when South Indians were immolating themselves to keep compulsory Hindi classes out of their schools.[66]

Cho himself plays the character of Tughlaq, and continues to develop and expand that role through the *Tughlaq* journal. This character is quite flat, never serious about anything except his own power and public image. This is exactly Aparna Dharwadker's assessment of Karnad's character Aziz:

> In the character of Aziz the will to power is unhampered by any moral or psychological complexity, and the play's absolutist discourse of power comes appropriately from him, not from Tughlaq….Tughlaq's self-reflexivity never produces this ironic clarity, and while Tughlaq is lost in epoch-making gestures, Aziz conducts his own micropolitics with singular success.[67]

It is notable that both Aziz and Cho's Tughlaq end the plays triumphant while Karnad's Tughlaq is "dazed and frightened, as though he can't comprehend where he is."[68]

Girish Karnad's Mohammad bin Tughlaq, with his internal struggle and increasing madness, is balanced by the comic character of Aziz. The two characters conflate in the end, when Tughlaq recognizes himself in Aziz and offers the man a government job. Aziz's cynical attitude toward politics and politicians is much closer to Cho's Tughlaq, and Karnad's splitting of this character adds depth to the portrait of Jawaharlal Nehru that is visible in his Mohammad bin Tughlaq. When they are escorting the people on their forced march to Delhi, Aziz says to his friend Aazam:

> You are a hopeless case, you know. Pathetic! You've been in Delhi for so many years and you're as stupid as ever. Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I

[66] See Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India 1891-1970.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997.
[67] Dharwadker 2005, p. 254.
[68] Karnad 1994, p. 221.

> have discovered a whole new world—politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is—politics! It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks I used in our village to pinch a few torn clothes from people—if one uses half that intelligence here, one can get robes of power. And not have to pinch them either—get them! It's a fantastic world![69]

Cho's Tughlaq, like Aziz, works to manipulate the system; Karnad's Tughlaq *is* the system. It is the logic of this foil character Aziz that relates to the logic of Cho Ramasamy's Mohammad bin Tughlaq. They are the cynics, the keen observers and takers of advantage, and they are the comic element in both plays. Cho's play, therefore, is a comedy. It is funny throughout. Aziz has only a few scenes in Karnad's play, but each one is essential and shows the audience another side to Tughlaq's policies.

Aziz's definition of a king is what Karnad's Tughlaq does, without acknowledging it, but Cho's Tughlaq does openly. Right up until the end when Aziz confronts him, Karnad's Tughlaq is still trying to justify his actions to himself and his advisors, holding vainly onto his idealism and asking "what gives me the right to call myself a King?"[70] Aziz never has a question about this: "I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding. You rob a man, you run, and hide. It's all so pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class'—that's being a real king!"[71] When he confronts Tughlaq with his actions, Tughlaq's first reaction is to yell at him: "Hold your tongue, fool! You dare pass judgment on me? You think your tongue is so light and swift that you can trap me by your stupid clowning?"[72] But in the end he admits that punishing the man he has publicly welcomed as a saint would not be a good idea and instead offers him a post as an

[69] Ibid., p. 190.
[70] Ibid., p. 181.
[71] Ibid., p. 198.
[72] Ibid., p. 217.

officer in his army. He explains to his advisor Barani that "[i]f justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hopes, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow. Anyway what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the blinding madness of the day?"[73]

The Canon of Modern Indian Drama

Having compared the two Tughlaq plays, I now turn to a consideration of how Cho's play transcends the sabha theater that he is part of to share characteristics with the plays of the modern Indian dramatic canon, as exemplified by Karnad's play. The plays and performances that are indisputably part of the modern Indian canon reveal a conception of Indian "modern" or "post-colonial" theater that is not fully compatible with the sabha genre.

Sabha theater differs from the plays in the national canon in that it is primarily a performance genre, not a literary one. Dharwadker writes that "post-independence urban theatre…participates equally in the cultures of (print) textuality and performance."[74] Very few sabha plays are published. As explained earlier, these playwrights typically sell the rights to their plays, which are written for a specific troupe or actor. Playwright Venkat told me that they generally do not even keep a copy of the script for themselves. Cho's plays share more characteristics with the plays of the Indian modern canonical dramas than most sabha plays, and he is one of the few Tamil sabha playwrights who actually publishes his work. The plays are published as literature and can be read and

[73] Ibid., p. 219.
[74] Dharwadker 2005, p. 4

analyzed whether or not they are performed, though their primary existence has been on stage.[75]

The distinction that Dharwadker makes between "performance-based" and "text-based" theater becomes difficult to maintain in the context of sabha theater. It makes sense that improvisational folk theater genres with their bright costumes and participatory music are performance-based, while the plays of Girish Karnad, for example, which are published in several languages and offer all sorts of opportunities for literary analysis, are text-based. There is very little, however, that is "performative" about sabha theater,[76] yet practitioners and audiences alike find that its value is almost purely in performance. This does not even need to be a live performance. The plays are primarily comedies, and the jokes also work on TV, film, and audiocassette. The audiocassette phenomenon demonstrates exactly how little is added to the play by the blocking, sets, costumes, or gesture. The general consensus is that it isn't necessary to actually *see* the performance, but that jokes are flat on the page and the play loses its dynamism in print. The actor gives inflection and timing to the script, and those are essential components of the humor.

This focus on humor and comedy plays may offer another hint as to why Tamil plays have not made it into the Indian canon, let alone gained much international recognition. In her study of Tamil humor, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi writes that "[i]f we count play with language to be a theme it outranks every other theme occurring

[75] Several of Cho's plays, including *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* (1970), were also released as films. Following Viveka Fine Arts Golden Jubilee in 2004 a collection of five recorded stage plays were released on DVD and VCD.

[76] One great example of performativity in this play is the stylized way that Cho walks as Mohammad bin Tughlaq. There is consistently an odd little hop in his step for this role that he doesn't use in any other play I've seen. I was greatly puzzled by this until I read in one of the histories of Tamil drama that in the older historical dramas of the nineteenth century the actors playing kings would rub jackfruit on the soles of their shoes to deliberately slow down their steps and lend them dignity. It is possible that Cho is imitating this practice in his portrayal of Mohammad bin Tughlaq.

in [Tamil] jokes."[77] These jokes do not translate very well and they are usually written with a particular actor in mind. Besides the language jokes, many Tamil sabha plays include humor based on events or circumstances specific to the city of Chennai, which may not be funny to audiences unfamiliar with the city.

These obstacles to translation and production by other troupes also help keep the sabha plays out of the modern Indian canon, which emphasizes an active translation and performance history for its plays:

> [T]he last five decades have demonstrated that in Indian theatre the prompt recognition of new plays as contemporary classics does not depend so much on publication or performance in the original language of composition as on the rapidity with which the plays are performed and (secondarily) published in other languages. Such proliferation keeps a play in constant circulation among readers and viewers, creating the layers of textual meaning and stage interpretation that become the measure of its significance.[78]

Karnad's *Tughlaq* was staged in Kannada and Hindi in 1965, and soon after in Marathi and Bengali; the English translation came out in 1970. In contrast, Cho's play was first performed in 1968, but was not published in Tamil until much later.[79] My own recent English translation is the first of Cho's famous play. Very few other Tamil plays have been translated into English, Hindi, or other Indian languages,[80] and those very recently. Indira Parthasarathy's 1978 play *Nandan Kathai* was translated into English in 2003,[81] his *Aurangzeb* was translated in 2000 for Deshpande's *Modern Indian Drama* anthology, and Komal Swaminathan's 1980 *Taṇṇīr! Taṇṇīr!* only became available to non-Tamil

[77] Ferro-Luzzi, Gabriella Eichinger. *The Taste of Laughter: Aspects of Tamil Humour*. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992, p. 3.
[78] Dharwadker 2005, p. 75.
[79] I have not been able to find a first-run copy, but the second printing was in 1995. It is likely that the first printing was in the early 1990s, when some of Cho's other famous plays were first published.
[80] With the possible exception of Malayalam.
[81] Indira Parthasarathy. *The Legend of Nandan*. Translated by C. T. Indra. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003.

speakers as of 2001. None of these recently translated plays is a comedy, and each has roots in the leftist movements that so heavily influenced the majority of plays in the national canon.

A Serious Canon

"Sabha Theater," as a genre, is not just defined by its patronage structure, though this is what gives it its name. As discussed in chapter two, it is also a performance aesthetic and a dramatic format. There is room within this structure to accommodate plays as different as *My Dear Kuṭṭi Picācu* (*My Dear Little Evil Spirit*), *Washingtonil Tirumaṇam* (*Marriage in Washington*), *Pass Mark, One More Exorcist, Cāttiram Co<u>nn</u>atillai* (*The Sastras Didn't Say So*), and *Mīcai Ā<u>n</u>ālum Ma<u>n</u>aivi* (*She's My Wife Even Though She Has a Moustache*), but these plays share many more elements than one might expect. The themes and approaches vary widely to include horror, audience participation comedy, serious social themes, comedy based on American culture, political satire, and cross-dressing comedy, but the plays share formal and aesthetic characteristics such as scene division, blocking, costume, sound systems, and acting style.

> This diversity is also present in canonical modern Indian dramas, which
>
> draw on myth, history, folklore, sociopolitical experience, and the resources of earlier texts to reflect on culture, nation, gender, class, identity, experience, and modern citizenship in the postcolonial state.[82]

The second part of Dharwadker's study is a series of readings of plays, which she has grouped together under a few headings in order to demonstrate the breadth of the canon. The striking similarity, however, is that all the plays in her study, indeed in the canon of modern Indian drama itself, are *serious* plays, a term she uses without complication, although it has many connotations.

[82] Dharwadker 2005, p. 71

In the sense that Dharwadker uses the word "serious" to describe modern Indian dramas, she implies that all these plays are by writers who are committed to the theater. The division is "between serious and commercial theatre,"[83] and it is that chasm Dharwadker sees as limiting channels of publication and performance. Importantly, the division between "serious" and "commercial" cannot be mapped onto the dichotomy of "amateur" and "professional," which makes it much harder to distinguish between the "serious" theater that forms the modern Indian canon and the plays that are performed in Chennai's sabhas.

As early as 1956 Indian theater discourse had developed specific meanings for the terms "professional" and "amateur" that are a bit counterintuitive. These meanings, as Dharwadker explains in the following passage, came to refer not only to the financial situation of the troupes, but also to the types of plays that they performed.

> Because of its association with urban proscenium theatres and the Parsi stage, by the 1950s the term 'professional' had come to denote not just commercial or full-time activity but a theatre that was nonserious, superficial, inartistic, or merely popular, and hence not worth preserving. The counterterm 'amateur' referred occasionally to lightweight college and community productions, but it mainly denoted aesthetic and thematic seriousness, artistic boldness, and long-term commitment to the art. The term was, in fact, a misnomer for a type of theatre organization that had appeared immediately after independence in some major Indian cities and had already begun to alter the aesthetics and economics of performance.[84]

The other factor in the connotations of "professional" and "amateur" that specifically relates to sabha theater comes out of the discourse about classical dance. Dancers from traditional dance communities who made their livings by performing were considered to be professionals. This had a negative connotation in Tamil Brahmin circles because of the association of these women with prostitution that eventually led to the 1947 Anti-

[83] Ibid., p. 84.
[84] Ibid., p. 43.

Dedication Bill that made it illegal to dedicate girls to temples as *devadasis.* As part of the vast project to reform and revive the dance that is today known as Bharata Natyam, women from wealthier, high-caste communities began to perform. Their involvement gave respectability to the art, but one of the primary components of this prestige was their designation as *amateurs.* These women did not need to earn money by dancing or any other means. Their fathers (and occasionally husbands, though it was common for them to stop dancing publicly after marriage) earned enough money that these women could dance simply to glorify Indian culture, and Tamil culture, in particular. If tickets were sold, the performance was usually a benefit and the proceeds were donated to a worthy charity.[85]

This discourse, which was taking place within the sabhas where Bharata Natyam was performed by respectable women, bled over into theater discourse as well. It was much more respectable to be an amateur performer, with income from another job, than a professional who depended on performance for a living. In the case of sabha theater, this has been one reason for the formation of troupes through friends and family and the disdain toward remuneration that many artists will express, though not necessarily sincerely. The amateur scenario also gives artists the freedom to produce the plays they think best, not the most profitable. It is still very difficult to make a living as a theater artist in India, and most urban performers would classify themselves as amateurs. This is certainly true in the context of sabhas, and Dharwadker mentions many of the forerunners of the modern Indian theater, Girish Karnad among them, who also "have made the familiar compromise of making a living in film and television in order to pursue the

[85] Gaston, Anne-Marie. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre.* New Delhi: Manohar, 1996, p. 67.

theatre of their choice."[86] So sabha theater artists are just as "serious" in terms of commitment and time investment as the modern Indian theater practitioners.

If the chasm is between "serious" and "commercial" theatre it is also important to consider what commercial theater in Chennai looks like. "Commercial" can have two meanings. First, it can imply a theater that is profitable and commercially viable. This is highly unusual in Chennai. The few troupes whose shows are profitable (Natakapriya, Crazy Creations, United Amateur Artists) have troupe leaders who are highly successful in the mass media fields of television and film. The mass media is where the money is, not the stage.[87] The other meaning of "commercial," and the one that is employed in discussions of Tamil theater, is that of pandering to the masses and giving the audiences what they want, presumably compromising the players' artistic integrity. Comedian S. Ve. Shekher is very frank about his manipulation of plays to fit the audience. He uses improvisation based on his communication with the audience to follow what he calls the "script graph." He says that he never complains that the audience members are fools. They are very clever and if they're not responding then he must not be communicating properly and needs to change something.[88] Cho, on the other hand, is proud of the fact that his plays still resonate with audiences exactly as they were written forty years ago.

Another dimension to the designation "serious" is to look at the tenor of the plays themselves. The sabha genre actually divides its plays into "comedy plays" and "serious plays," but the modern Indian dramas involve humor only incidentally. Based on the

[86] Dharwadker 2005, p. 122. The other theater practitioners mentioned include Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar, Chandrasekhar Kambar, Shombhu Mitra, and Vijaya Mehta.
[87] Delhi Ganesh, a film actor who used to do stage plays with Kathadi Ramamurthy, told me that "acting in one film is equivalent to acting in a thousand dramas" in terms of both publicity and remuneration. His opinion that no one stays with the stage because they prefer it over film is widely held. If those actors were called to the film world, he told me, they would "forget stage." My interview with Delhi Ganesh, April 24, 2004.
[88] My interview with S. Ve. Shekher on July 8, 2003.

trends in the film industry, where it is the serious plays of the parallel cinema movement that avoid song and dance sequences and deal with social issues that tend to receive critical attention and be invited to international film festivals, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that there are no riotous comedy plays in the national canon of dramatic literature in India.[89] Within the sabha genre, "serious" plays tend to dominate the attention of critics but flop with audiences, while the comedies become the modern classics.[90]

Tamil television serial and film audiences do not seem to have this same bias toward humor, but television serials are very short and the tension in films is periodically broken by music and dance sequences. A serious sabha play like Prayatna's *3.42*, though it included critically lauded innovations such as ventriloquism and an all-male cast, is non-stop tension for two straight hours. The play concerns an injured athlete who is jealous of his young protégé and attempts to sabotage him, eventually driving the boy to suicide. The emotion and tension is "tedious" and "unendurable after a point,"[91] according to well-known drama critic Kausalya Santhanam.

Perhaps one reason for this penchant for comedy is that sabha audiences are connoisseurs of the classical music and dance traditions and are therefore trained in a way of viewing that *detaches* them from the action on stage. *Rasa* is the "savor" of an

[89] The famous actress Nargis expressed a widely-held aversion to "peddling India's poverty abroad" in comments she made about the films of the well-known parallel filmmaker Satyajit Ray (quoted in Rajadhyaksa, Ashis. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 404).
[90] My audience survey asked viewers to name or describe their favorite plays or performers. Comedy plays and troupes accounted for 630 out of 764 responses (some people listed more than one). Thirty-five responses either express a mixture of comedy and serious drama or were obscure or illegible. Of the ninety-nine people whose stated preference is non-comedy theater, eighty-one of them specified mythological or historical dramas by R. S. Manohar, the T. K. S. Brothers, Nawab Rajamanickam, Kittappa, and S. V. Sahasranaman.
[91] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Very Little to Rave About." *The Hindu.* May 14, 2004.

emotion that one experiences from, for example, watching a dance performance with its stylized gesture language. The sabha plays offer exaggerated views into typical family life to audiences that are ready to relax for the evening and enjoy some entertainment. Comedy is more easily accommodated by a viewing style that favors intellectual detachment and connoisseur-like interpretation of the action. If the audience doesn't get involved with the characters, serious dramas can lose their power and appeal. Comedies, on the other hand, deliberately keep the viewer at a distance and allow writers, directors, and actors to slip in messages and allude to serious and political issues that may get through to the audiences, especially if they listen to the play more than once, as many do. The Chennai sabha audiences are so trained in viewing this way that satire and humor are perhaps the best ways to approach serious issues, as Cho has demonstrated with *Mohammad bin Tughlaq,* a play whose message is still being discussed in the city after nearly forty years.

Conclusion: Cho's Influence on Tamil Drama

In the late 1950s the drama scene in Madras changed with the start of theatrical patronage by the sabhas. The new system meant that it became "difficult to commercially stage plays in Madras without the support of [s]abhas, which can provide both resources and easy access to an audience through their members."[92] That statement is as true today as it was when S. Shankar wrote it in 2001 and when Farley Richmond described the scene in 1990. Cho Ramasamy and Komal Swaminathan were some of the few playwrights to survive within the sabha system and outside of it. They both challenged what Shankar described as the "oppressive mediocrity and uniformity bred by

[92] Shankar 2001, p. xiii.

the system"[93] and proved that the tastes of these audiences were broader than they at first appeared. Like Swaminathan, Cho seems to be a cross-over artist, with his brand of comedy earning good gate collection for sabhas all over the city and also earning the respect of a nationally-recognized modern theater movement through critics like A. N. Perumal, Saktiperumal, and N. S. Jagannathan.

Tamil theater in general is still trying to overcome the low reputation that has stayed with it due to the public nature of performance and the low status of the professional artists typically involved in it. The association of drama with popular social and political movements and political leaders such as former Chief Ministers M. Karunanidhi and C. N. Annadurai has helped its reputation. These writers have bestowed some legitimacy and efficacy on the dramatic form, which still plays a role as a vehicle for political opinion in the state through writers like Cho, but also through street dramas. Writers such as Swaminathan and Cho are helping Tamil drama to enter the world of modern Indian drama that has been primarily the provenance of Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, and Kannada writers. Their plays are not regarded as having literary merit since they are written in spoken, not literary Tamil, and often in a marked Brahmin dialect, but they are recognized as addressing relevant issues in a popular urban context.

The idea of the gullibility of the people addressed in *Tughlaq* and the fear that they will imitate anything they see in the media is a very live issue in the Tamil community. This is why it is so important to fans to keep repeating that the dramas are clean and healthy, unlike TV or cinema, and it is something that Cho pokes a great deal of fun at. The premise of this play turns on the gullibility of a man who should be well-educated enough to know that no magic herbs would keep Mohammad bin Tughlaq and

[93] Ibid., p. xiv.

Ibn Battuta alive in a box for 600 years. Rangachari, the college history professor, after his initial surprise that the two men speak fluent Tamil, raises no more questions as to the authenticity of their identity. He merely says that the miraculous herbs should be studied, prompting "Tughlaq" to throw them in the river, making this impossible. And with a historian, a Tughlaq expert, in fact, to vouch for his identity, the Mohammad bin Tughlaq of 1968 has all the credibility he needs to run for public office. The people in Cho's play simply shrug. Sometimes they riot, but they are appeased by empty promises and the college students enjoy the time off to go to the cinema. The politicians simply raise their hands when so instructed, causing Tughlaq to comment:

> Tugh: Battuta! Do you see the state of the Parliament? People who are experts in raising their hands. It's enough if they say to. These people will raise their hands (shows his hand). They have taken the votes of thousands of people to come to Parliament and stand with their hands up. Traffic constables![94]

Compared to this conspicuous lack of suspicion in Cho's play, Karnad's Tughlaq faces suspicion on every side. Neither Hindus nor Muslims trust him, and even his advisors, friends, and relatives have their doubts and misgivings about his motives, policies, and everything else.

Cho's plays may be funny, but they are very serious in terms of their messages. Each joke has a keen observation behind it that the reader/viewer can recognize, enjoy, and perhaps see himself in. Not only is he one of the most popular dramatists the Tamil language has ever seen, he is one who is looked up to and emulated by many writers and performers.

[94] Ramasamy (Rudisill translation 2001), p. 42.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I argue that there is a genre of theater that can be identified as "sabha theater" and to define what that delineation means. I examine the places in the historical and scholarly narrative of Tamil drama where traces of its influences and origins can be found under different names such as amateur theater, modern theater, and metro theater. I argue that today's sabha theater found its roots in the work of Pammal Sambanda Mudaliyar, who founded the first amateur Tamil-language drama troupe run by elites in 1891. This troupe, the Suguna Vilasa Sabha, was also a place where members of the Brahmin community, who before this point were largely confined to the English-language theater if they wanted to act, could be involved in Tamil-language theater. Mudaliyar's other big innovation that contributed to a major shift in Tamil theater was his authoring of social dramas, that is, non-mythological and historical plays.

I study the political and cultural context in which the sabha dramas emerged in the "long-1950s," to use Itty Abraham's term. During this period, which started around India's 1947 independence, issues of the formation of both national and regional cultural identities became very important, particularly to India's Brahmin community. Members of that community all over India tended to dominate government and were therefore hugely influential in the definition and valuation of cultural performances around the country as "classical," "folk," or "authentic," or not. Those projects codified and offered outlets for nationally-recognized artistic performances. The Chennai sabhas, which had developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to support classical music and dance and fit squarely into this nationalist project, also began to support sabha

dramas in the 1950s. These dramas had limited appeal because of their colloquial Brahmin-dialect Tamil language and their emphasis on the middle-class Brahmin family.

This was particularly important in the state of Tamilnadu, which saw the rise of a powerful anti-Brahmin movement during this period of the long 1950s. I argue that this political movement was one impetus for the Brahmin community's production of this form of popular entertainment, whose self-selected viewers tended to share regional culture and language as well as high caste and class statuses. The plays thus function as an apology for the Brahmin community and a celebration of its culture. I have aimed, though this study, to broaden understanding of the Tamil Brahmin community in Chennai and the types of entertainment that it patronizes. This community has a very strong identity and deliberately promotes stereotypes of itself through religious performances as well as the classical music and dance typically supported by sabhas. These cultural organizations played a very significant role in crafting Chennai's reputation as a center of culture in India through their support of the classical arts and especially the Music Festival that they organize annually.

One of the things that makes sabha theater so remarkable is simply the fact that it takes place within the sabha system but is not usually embraced as a legitimate representative of Tamil Brahmin culture. Because the plays tend to be created, supplied, and used by this insular group (to use Herbert Gans' categories[1]), I have argued that the comedy plays of the sabha genre are a particularly fruitful place to explore the acknowledged and unacknowledged traits of Tamil Brahmins. The logical extremes to

[1]Gans, Herbert J. *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste.* Revised and updated edition. New York: Basic Books, 1999.

which they take the characters and family relations and what they find funny can serve as a window into their identity.

I describe sabha plays as having an "amateur aesthetic," meaning two things. First, that its practitioners and viewers deliberately distinguish their form of theater from the musically-based, visually spectacular Tamil-language "professional" theater, whose actors had very poor reputations. Second, that all aspects of production are cheap, simplistic, and generally designed to remind viewers that artists are amateurs and participating in theater for their own enjoyment, rather than financial gain. The professional theater aesthetic was, by the late 1940s, assimilated by increasingly popular field of cinema, and production aspects were another way in which the sabha theater could distinguish itself. The costumes, for example, are usually simply the clothes that ordinary Tamil Brahmins would wear everyday, and the sets are generic and rented for nearly every production by every troupe, rather than being designed for individual plays.

Close readings of plays in the second half of the dissertation help to identify some of the impulses behind the origins and continuation of sabha theater. These readings are an attempt to work from the humor in the plays (themes, jokes) to a deeper understanding of Tamil Brahmin culture.

The sabha theater genre is one that has inspired a great deal of discussion and criticism, and my interest in this genre was really roused by the seemingly contradictory discourse surrounding it. The same people who speak so disparagingly about these plays are very often the same ones who watch them. This dissertation has aimed to look closely at particular plays and their reception in order to partially explain the discrepancies between attitude and consumption that are visible in this medium.

I would like to end with a few suggestions for new or further areas of inquiry that have arisen from this work. One area for future study is the sabha patronage system itself. I have focused primarily on the creators and the users of this culture, but the suppliers play a key role that I have only scratched the surface of. Another area for future inquiry is the consumption of these plays by non-Chennai audiences. The troupes often tour abroad and the pleasure taken in them by members of the diasporic communities is worth considering seriously. Thirdly, a fruitful area of study would be to follow these plays as they make their appearance in text. Plays that have not previously been considered "literature" (for example those of S. Ve. Shekher and Crazy Mohan) have been published in the years since I did my fieldwork. It will be interesting to see how they are faring in the new format.

Epilogue

THE FUTURE OF SABHA THEATER

Though it has lost the support it had in earlier decades, the sabha theater is still going strong. Some of the old formulas still draw audiences, but many artists have realized that they need to do something different in order to keep seats in theaters filled and are actively working toward that goal. This involves strategies for both the retention of current audiences and the recruitment of new ones.

There are two main demographics that sabha drama troupes are trying to bring into the theaters: members of the younger generations and residents of Chennai's outlying neighborhoods. The younger generation of middle-class Chennai-ites generally prefers to attend films or go to the large air-conditioned malls that are cropping up all over the city or even go bowling or perhaps to an English-language play. New strategies are required to bring them to the sabhas. They expect air-conditioning, standard in the malls and major cinema halls, so nicer theaters mean more audience members (but also more expense). Additionally, they are not interested in some of the tired old themes of the sabha dramas. The tale of the tradition-bound patriarch is not compelling for this generation. The slow tempos and poor production values of the plays, especially in comparison to the English-language productions and films, are also deterrents to attendance.

Artists also take seriously the need to take their plays to more remote areas of the city in order to keep performing. Although many of the key artists and troupe leaders live in Mylapore or T. Nagar, many of their younger troupe members do not and performing closer to home would be more convenient for them. The same is true for

audience members. Many people from the target Tamil Brahmin community have moved to the outlying areas in recent years. In Pallavaram, Tambaram, and Perambur, for example, they can own a house, whereas in the desirable, central, and therefore expensive Mylapore and T. Nagar neighborhoods they could only afford to rent. It is difficult to travel from the outlying areas of the city through traffic and pollution to attend a play, as well as expensive, so it is not a frequent undertaking. However, if there were plays presented in those neighborhoods, they might be inclined to attend.

Besides these practical changes in the way theater is presented, changes in subject matter, aesthetics, and production may provide an incentive both for new audiences to attend and for current or former audiences who have been bored by the stagnant state of sabha dramas to return to the theater. This may be especially important for plays staged in halls (for example, the R. R. Sabha and Mylapore Fine Arts Club) lacking the amenities of air-conditioning, good bathroom facilities, and quality refreshments. Most new theater troupes cannot afford to perform in the more expensive halls, so innovation is a particular concern for them.

Some artists claim that they have already seen the positive effects of their innovations. S. L. Naanu, a writer and actor who frequently works with Kathadi Ramamurthy, contrasted the dynamism of sabha drama with the monotony of television serials in his explanation of why he thinks theater audiences are improving. He told me in a July 12, 2003 interview that television had spoiled the drama audience for a while, but now television shows are monotonous. His impression is that television has saturated the market, so theater attendance and sabha membership have actually been improving in recent years. I think that these new endeavors to challenge audiences and regain respect

for the genre may be part of the renewed interest in sabha theater that Naanu and others have perceived.

Innovation in the dramas is taking many forms and affecting all aspects of the production. One major trend that I can point to with regard to theme in recent years is an increase in the number of plays that are identified as having social or religious messages. In this epilogue I will briefly discuss a few plays that I think exemplify these trends, most of which attempt to combine the comedy that sabha theater is known for with a depth of social consciousness intended to engage and challenge audience members.

For years religion has been one of the major causes of division, war, and strife in our world. The United Amateur Artists drama troupe, which is one of the most active in Chennai, has made a tremendous effort with their 2004 play *Ubhadesam Seivathu UAA* to laugh about religious pretensions. The play, written by Venkat, demonstrates how the strict following of doctrines can interfere with common sense and basic human decency to everyone's detriment. In addition to the unusual theme, the play adopts a new type of format for the sabha genre and consists of several short skits followed by an hour-long show. This structure allows for the critique of a number of different religions as each small skit depicts a story or tale from a different religious or philosophical tradition in a humorous way. The longer piece demonstrates some of the difficulties and potential complications of the "vow of silence" and involves a lot of mime and physical humor that is also atypical of this predominantly verbal genre. The UAA has managed throughout its fifty-year history to continually reinvent itself and stay relevant to sabha audiences with its timely themes, slick productions, and innovative formats.

Most sabha dramas focus on the family, and references to religion are made in that context. Characters do pujas at home or go to the temple. Marriages take place and priests and holy men are consulted on a variety of topics. Prior to these family or social dramas, the Tamil stage was dominated by mythological and historical dramas. These dramas often told the stories of the gods and the lives of the saints and kings. What makes *Ubhadesam Seivathu UAA* so unique is not only the format, but the combination of these two types of play. The centralization of religion and didacticism recall the early mythologicals, and most audience members are familiar with at least one of the stories. These tales are told, however, not from the point of view of the gods, but from that of humans struggling to live their lives according to one of these philosophies. This human element allows for the portrayal of the errors and misinterpretations that can be so comic. The play is a successful mix of the two styles of theater and keeps the audience laughing and thinking at the same time. Three of the five skits explicitly address Hinduism; one involves a discussion between religious leaders of Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam; and the final one is based on Zen Buddhist teachings. The skits are drawn together by veteran actor A. R. Srinivasan who acts as the narrator, or *sutradhar*, of the play. As such, he is merely an offstage voice, but one that prepares the audience for what is to come as well as hinting at the humor. During his opening speeches for each scene, well-lit posters of the various religious leaders are displayed on the corner of the stage. This production detail had the effect of sobering the humor by reminding audience members of the philosophies and figures that are taken so seriously within the society.

The play opens with a skit called “Guru Sishyan” about a religious teacher and one of his students. We are told by the narrator that this is one of many small stories

(*ci<u>nn</u>a ci<u>nn</u>a pala kataikaḷ* or *oka ci<u>nn</u>a katha* in Sai Baba's native language of Telugu) by means of which Sathya Sai Baba performs the miracle (*mirakiḷ*) of helping his devotees (*bhaktarkaḷ*) easily reach the secrets of the Vedas.[1] There are many lessons to be learned from this brief segment, but the primary one is that although it is true that the student should follow the words of his teacher, he must also use his common sense and not take everything the guru says literally.

The audience and press were very excited about this opening skit because of the set design. The bullock cart with moving clouds really looked like it was progressing across the stage, and therefore evoked nostalgia in the viewers for the mythological and historical dramas put on by R. S. Manohar and other profession troupes. Manohar was famous for his elaborate and "trick" sets, and actually stopped performing for many years after a back injury sustained from falling during a flying scene in one of his plays.

The plot is simple. Guru and sishya are traveling together on the bullock cart and the guru is sleeping with his head in the sishya's lap. He wakes up and searches for his *kamaṇṭalam*, a pot containing holy water that he will use for ritual purposes.[2] When he can't find it, he asks the sishya if he knows where it is. It transpires that the *kamaṇṭalam* has fallen in a ditch along the road a good while back but the sishya didn't want to stop the cart for fear of waking the guru over such a trivial thing. He explains to the guru: "You said not to wake you even if thunder fell…If I woke you when a *kamaṇṭalam* fell…."[3] The guru tells him that in the future if anything falls off the cart he is to stop the cart and pick it up. So when the bullock defecates, the sishya stops the cart and collects

[1] Venkat. *Ubhadesam Seivathu UAA.* Unpublished manuscript, 2004, p. 1.
[2] It was also suggested to me in an interview, that waking in the morning and looking for a pot of water could be interpreted as the guru needing to go to the toilet, which is another subtle opening for humor.
[3] Venkat 2004, p. 2.

the manure, keeping it right where it wakes the guru with its terrible stench. The cart driver, laughing at all of these proceedings, tells the guru that he needs to tell the sishya in no uncertain terms exactly what he should pick up and what he should not. The guru sees the wisdom in this and makes a list for the sishya of all the things on the cart that need to be collected in case of a fall.

At this point, the audience is laughing, anticipating the next segment of the story. The lights fade out and a loud noise is heard on the darkened stage. When the lights come up the guru has disappeared. The driver turns to the sishya and asks him about both the noise and the missing guru, to which the sishya replies, "[t]here is a relationship between the sound you heard and the fact that you don't see the guru. The guru fell off ten miles back."[4] When the driver asks why the sishya didn't inform him, the man tells him, "[l]ook at this list. If anything from this list fell the guru said to pick it up. The guru's name is not on this list."[5] The skit ends with the driver smacking himself on the forehead in disbelief.

The portrayal of the sishya is as an idiot, but there is an undercurrent of insubordination that runs behind his slavish obedience to the guru. There are implications of the guru's worldliness and impropriety in the text. After the guru writes the list, the cart driver turns to him with a dilemma: which of the two girls who have been offered to him should he marry? One is poor but beautiful and the other is ugly but rich. The guru tells him that "[t]oday money will come and tomorrow it will go—only beauty is permanent in this world. Therefore marry the poor but beautiful girl."[6] As soon as the driver respectfully agrees to follow the guru's advice, the guru tells him to

[4] Ibid., p. 4.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

give him the address of the ugly rich girl. The guru is forever calling his student an "idiot" (*aṟivili, maṭaiyaṉ*) and asks rhetorically how he ever got such an idiot for a student. The student responds as if the guru really wanted an answer, explaining that the guru had compelled him to be his sishya since he was unable to find anyone else. The implication, of course, is that he is not much of a guru. He needed a student in order to define himself as a "teacher" (guru) and there is the subtle accusation of coercion and self-aggrandizement in the sishya's comment. In contrast, there is nothing but respect in the sishya's voice. The subversion of the guru's instructions is a source of great humor, much appreciated by audiences.

There are several other plays that have also broached the topic of religion, and here I would like to mention one by a new troupe that is gaining respect in critical as well as audience circles. Most troupes have branched from other troupes, but there are a few that have appeared with all newcomers to the Chennai drama scene. Playwright V. Sreevatson's work is quite innovative in the world of sabha theater, and the troupe was in fact founded in order to counter the what the members saw as stagnation in currently available dramas.

Dummies Drama's[7] first play, *Women's Rea*, followed the typical sabha style, but the plot, where a young man tells a prospective landlord, who doesn't like to rent to bachelors, that he is married and his wife has gone home to her parents for the delivery of their baby, is something new. When a woman shows up at his doorstep claiming to be his wife, the confusion really begins. For his second play *Kūttāṭi*, Sreevatson scoured Bharata Natyam schools all over the city looking for seven children to play the roles of

[7] Also known as "Dummies Communications."

students at a dance studio. They had to learn a short dance and perform on stage, a combination of the classical arts with the sabha theater that was, surprisingly, quite new.[8]

Vinodaya Chittam (*Contented Mind*), the play that Dummies Communications inaugurated in 2004, like UAA's, brought religion to the stage. This play was designed to teach lessons about detachment. The main character Parasuraman dies, then convinces Death to send him back to life. Death, in the guise of a friend's son, moves into Parasuraman's house and advises him on his life choices. At first, everything goes wrong for the man. He is passed up for a promotion, his wife gets sick, he spends all his money on medical bills, his daughter runs off with a young man, and his son loses his job in the US and returns home with a wife who dresses in revealing American clothes. In the second half of the play, everything goes right for him. He gets a better job than the one he'd been passed over for, his son gets his job back and has a doctor friend in the US who is a specialist and can cure the wife, and the daughter-in-law turns out to be a good Tamil girl who wears a sari beautifully and has a degree in mechanical engineering. Death lectures Parasuraman at this point that it is time to go and that he is not indispensable. Life is like a game in which the dead no longer participate, and he has to let go. At the end of the play, Parasuraman dies.

This play, with its overt message, was full of humor and the audiences, critics, and the judges at the Nataka Vizha of Karthik Fine Arts[9] really enjoyed it. Kausalya Santhanam called it "one of the best plays seen in recent times on the sabha circuit," and

[8] I've seen a few other plays (one by S. L. Naanu and one by T. V. Varadarajan) where main characters are classical musicians, but when they "play" music on stage they merely mime silently along to recorded music.

[9] Two awardees were chosen for each category and this play won Best Drama as well as Best Actor (for Sreevatson), Best Director (for Giridhar), Best Story Dialogue (for Sreevatson), Consolation Actor (for Sridhar), Best Actress (Hemalatha), the Best Drama S. Ve. Shekher Shield, the Best Director K. Balachander Shield (for Giridhar), and the Best Actor Late Gopalakrishnan Shield (for Sreevatson). "KFA Nataka Vizha Results," *The Hindu*, May 21, 2004.

held it up as an example of "how it is possible to please the mainstream audience and yet make a detour from the tried and tired path."[10] It still centers on the family and the relations between its members and is full of jokes, but this play also deliberately deals with philosophical themes.

Additionally, Dummies Drama departed from sabha standards aesthetically in terms of costumes, sets, and music. While most of the costumes were standard, Death was not given the elaborate kingly costumes usually seen on characters like Yama (the god of Death) in sabha plays. Instead, he was dressed in a stark black costume and given a fast, spare style of speech, which gave his character a very modern feel. It was in fact, highly reminiscent of Koothuppattarai's performance of N. Muthusamy's *Prahlada Charitram* that was directed by Israeli Gil Anon and staged at the Alliance Française in July of 2003. This, along with several other elements, improved the play's appeal to those intellectuals who tend to prefer "modern" dramas in the sense that Dharwadker uses the term.

In *Vinodaya Chittam,* for example, there was a great deal of trouble taken with the sets, which were more elaborately designed and drama-specific than most sabha sets. While there was some recorded music, this play also included a live keyboardist who interacted with the players. The members of Dummies Drama have set high standards for themselves, and all of these little touches also raise the standards for all sabha dramas, which I expect will become more aesthetically and theoretically sophisticated in the future.

New plays are beginning not just to discuss religious and philosophical themes, but are also looking at current events in a more considered way than, for example, S. Ve.

[10] Santhanam, Kausalya. "Lofty Theme Tackled Well." *The Hindu.* May 21, 2004.

Shekher's improvised asides. One play that fits this description is Bombay Chanakya's 2004 *Niṛam Māṛum Nijaṅkaḷ*, (*Truths that Change Color*) which directly addressed the events of September 11, 2001. The main character is a judge, played by Bombay Gnanam, grieving over the death of her daughter. The play basically takes you through the final, traumatic year of the daughter's life. The daughter studied in America then returned to India completely changed. She had lost interest in everything and wouldn't talk to anyone, to the despair of her parents, who are following the advice of an astrologer and trying to find a husband for her. Finally, they get a psychiatrist to hypnotize her. When she tells her story, we learn that when she was in New York, she had a boyfriend that she had not told anyone about. He went to the World Trade Center for an interview the morning of September 11th and died there. The monologue is punctuated by sirens and background music, ending when the girl collapses, still reliving the horrors of that day. This is one of the few plays I saw with live music, and the keyboardist really added a lot to the mood of spiraling tension and release in this scene.

The psychiatrist, who is many years older than the girl, decides to marry her. She becomes confused in her mind about who he is, often conflating him with her old boyfriend. They marry, and she begins to hear rumors about his first wife and her death, leading her to fear her husband. She has terrible dreams in which the boyfriend shows up alive and is murdered by her husband, and she finally goes crazy and gets violent, banging her head against a table so hard that she dies. To the person who walked in when her husband was trying to restrain her from hurting herself, it looked like he was banging her head against the table. The husband is accused of murder, but acquitted because there is no proof. He then dies of a heart attack.

Unlike most sabha plays, this one includes little humor, though there are a few jokes throughout designed to break the tension. One of the things I find most interesting about it is the way it takes an international event and brings it close to home for Tamils in the audience. Most middle-class Tamil Brahmins have relatives overseas, many in the US, and many of them aspire to send their children here for higher education. The play serves as a reminder that even when things seem far away, the world is in actuality quite small. There is no question, in this play, about which side India sees itself on in this war on terror. The family in the play, through their traumatized daughter, clearly identifies with the victims of the World Trade Center attacks.

These trends of trying to combine relevant social and political issues with family-oriented humor are one sign that artists are listening to the critics and the intellectuals in their audiences and trying to offer something different. This does not mean, however, that I think the "pure comedy" plays are being phased out. For the socially conscious plays to be "different," there needs to be a standard that they are different from, and comedy plays will continue to fill that role. They are still well-received by many, and the appeal of mindless entertainment, especially after a long day at the office, is very strong. With such charismatic, established performers as S. Ve. Shekher, Crazy Mohan, and Bosskey filling that need, however, it is difficult for unknowns to break in as comedians. For unknown artists, the intellectual appeal and innovations are more likely to bring recognition and respect from critics and audiences.

I am confident that the sabha theater will continue on in the years to come, but there are likely to be some changes in both the dramas and the organizational structure of sabha patronage. Because the genre has been losing audiences in recent years, I think

we'll see more and more innovative structures and themes in addition to more sophisticated staging in an attempt to draw audiences out of the cinema halls and the English language plays to the Tamil language theater. Troupes are likely to continue their efforts toward combining what have been two separate threads of sabha theater—the comedic and the serious—into single performances, since each is struggling on its own. There will be some shifts in troupes as the founders of the several well-known theater troupes have already or soon will be retiring and new troupes spring up, but I doubt there will be much change in the number of active troupes in the city over the next ten years.

I also do not expect the amount of money in theater to change a great deal, so the dependency on sabha patronage is likely to continue. I haven't seen it happen yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if sabhas started looking for alternative spaces in a variety of neighborhoods in which to stage plays in an effort to cut down on the expenses of hall rentals, allow for smaller audiences, and attract younger people and those in the outlying neighborhoods to performances. The Priya Cultural Academy, with zero members, may also be an organizational model for other sabhas to follow. With no membership to account to, no fixed schedule (for example, a play promised every second Thursday) and therefore no fixed overhead, this sabha has the freedom to sponsor whatever they happen to have the money for. The downside, however, is that the organizers need to spend a lot of time wooing corporate sponsors, advertising in order to sell tickets, and accepting whatever dates the different halls happen to have available.

The memberless sabha model could also resemble the seasonal sabha that is so common in the classical music genre and the single weekend performance that is common in the English-language theater in Chennai. These would be difficult

adjustments for the theater artists to make. They are used to performing year-round and one of the major landmarks of sabha dramas is the number of times they have been performed. There are usually celebratory functions held when a play is staged for the hundredth or five hundredth time, for example, and single weekend performances would preclude this tradition.

These changes in sabha theater that are visible over time are concrete examples of the way users of culture can affect the products that they consume, and I am excited to see how the emphasis of the dramas continues to shift in the future.

Music Dance Drama

Abbas/ Prabhat, 9840051463

Today 7-00 p.m., Narada Ghana Sabha Hall A/c, The Great Comedy Thinker Crazy Mohan's Record created, Masterpiece, Decent Comedy, Crazy Mohan, Balaji in MARRIAGE MADE IN SALOON. Gather to laugh together. Bkg. 9-00 a.m. at Hall: 24990850. Spons: MY TVS QUALITY USED CARS, MARS — MIOT ACCIDENT RESCUE SERVICES.

Abinaya/ TVK, 9840354779

Today 7 p.m. Narada Gana Sabha (Mini Hall) A/c, Comedy King S. V. Shekher's superhit hilarious non-stop comedy "YAMIRUKKA BAYAM YEAN". Bkg. 9-01 a.m. Ph: 24993201.

Arasu Arts/ Priya

Today at 7 p.m. at Rani Seethai Hall. Comedy King Basky in "OHO" By: T. D. Balu. Booking at the hall 5 p.m. onwards.

Bharat Kalachar

Prog. for Feb. 04. 8th Feb. 9 a.m. sharp under the Endowment of Sri P. OBUL REDDY & Smt. P. GNANAMBA — THIAGARAJA ARADHANA CELEBRATION and Group singing of PANCHARATHNA KRITHIS lead by Senior musicians; As a homage and in memory of former Chairman, Advisory Council, Bharat Kalachar awards Dr. SEMMANGUDI SRINIVASA IYER VET-

Bharat Kalachar

In association with Vision Care, 21st Feb. 6-30 p.m. at Dr. Rama Rao Kala Mandap (A/c), Habibullah Road, T.Nagar, Inauguration of U.A.A.'s new drama "UBHADESAM SEIVATHU UAA" — written by Venkat; dramatized and directed by Y. Gee. Mahendra; A Five in one Comedy rich with purposeful humour through unique stories told by Sri Sathya Sai Baba, Osho, The Gita and Zen Buddhism; Hon'ble Justice Sri K. S. Bakthavatsalam lights the Kuthuvilakku; website: www.ygeem.com

Brahma Gana Sabha (Ph:56106425)

At Rani Seethai Hall. 13th Feb. NALLATHORE VEENAI SAITHEY. 21st Feb. Rail Priyas Anniversary — Two fully hilarious Comedy Skits. 28th Feb. Kathadi's New Play ORU KODI ASAIGAL. Limited membership available.

Esther Fine Arts, 32857997

Today 6-50 p.m. at Rajaannamalai Mandram A/c, Nanjil Nee Manimaran in PUTHIYA BHOOMI, Cine Dance Programme. Bkg. 10 a.m.

Hamsadhwani (Regd.), 24915555

14th Annual February, March, April mega festival of 80 concerts commences on Wednesday, February 18 (Mahasivaraathiri day). Watch out for details. New members enrolled.

Hums and Drums, Phone: 26600985

To-day 2-30 p.m. SAINT THYAGARAJA SWAMIGAL ARADHANA PANCHARATNA KRITIS followed individual performances by Musicians at Maharishi Vidya Mandir, 28, Dr. Guruswamy Road, Off. Poonamalle High Road. Musicians Rasikas welcome.

Kalarasana

On 7th: Gitanjali's PENN BIMBANGAL by Augusto.

Kartik Fine Arts (Regd.), Ph: 24997788

Performance for Feb. 2004. 2nd PURANDARADASAR DAY — Music by CHARULATHA MANI — Tiruvarur Balam, Papanasam Kumar-Nanganallur Swaminathan. Talent promotion programme dances with financial aid from Tamilnadu Eyal

Hindu Feb 1, 2004

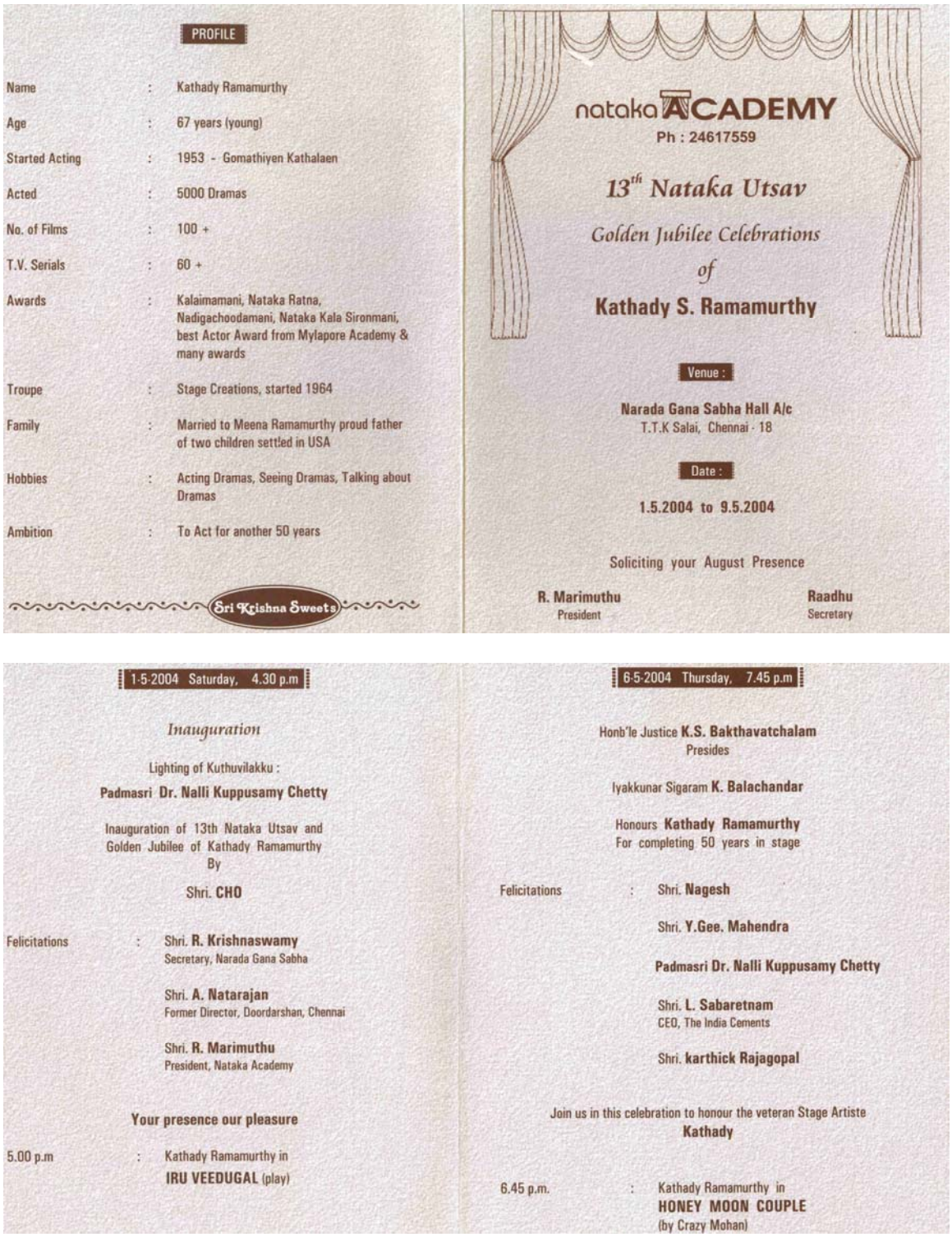
Figure 1

1. Annamalai Mandram
2. Kalaivanar Arangam
3. Vani Mahal
4. Krishna Gana Sabha
5. Bharat Kalachar
6. Rani Seethai Hall
7. Narada Gana Sabha
8. Music Academy
9. Mylapore Fine Arts Club
10. R. R. Sabha
11. TAMBRAAS main office
12. Tughlaq offices
13. Alliance Française
14. Max Mueller Bhavan
15. Museum Theater
16. Kamaraj Memorial Hall

Figure 2


Retteri Lake
Washermanpet
Tondiarpet
Perambur
Vyasarpadi
Royapuram
Surappattu Rd
Korattur
Korattur Eri
Villivakkam
Avadi
Jawaharlal Nehru Rd
Main Rd
Old Washermanpet
Bharathi Dock
Ambattur Lake
Dairy Rd
Chennai Tiruvallur High Rd
Ayanavaram
New Avadi Rd
Choolai
George Town
Ambedkar Dock
Ambattur
Anna Nagar
Thirumangalam
Kilpauk
Periyamet
Sowcarpet
Tiruvallur
Ambattur Industrial Estate
Poonamallee High Rd
Park Town
Chintadripet
Thiruverkadu
Koyambedu
Chennai
Triplicane
BYPASS Rd
Poonamallee High Rd
Maduraivoyal
Vadapalani
Vanagaram
NSK Salai
Royapettah
Marina Beach
Valasaravakkam
Arcot Rd
Mt Poonamallee Rd
Porur
Teynampet
Mylapore
Ayyappanthangal
Santhome Beach
Mowlivakkam
Nandambakkam
Nandanam
Kuyvathur Rd
Chennai Bypass Rd
Adyar River
Theosophical Society
Sardar Patel Rd
St Thomas Mt
Guindy
Adyar
Besant Nagar
Guindy National Park
Chennai Airport
Tharamani
Tiruneermalai
Meenambakkam
Thiruvanmiyur
kanchipuram
Madipakkam
Saint Thomas Mount
Valmiki Nagar
Sriperumbudur
Pallavaram
Velachery
Pallavaram
Tirusulam
Puzhuthivakkam
Perungudi
Kotivakkam
Penya Eri
Chromepet
Palavakkam
Chennai Bypass Rd
Pallikaranai
Okkiyam Thuraipakkam
Neelankarai
Tambaram
Velachery Rd
Velachery Rd
©2007 Google - Map data ©2007 Europa Technologies - Terms of Use

Figure 3



PROFILE

Name	:	Kathady Ramamurthy
Age	:	67 years (young)
Started Acting	:	1953 - Gomathiyen Kathalaen
Acted	:	5000 Dramas
No. of Films	:	100 +
T.V. Serials	:	60 +
Awards	:	Kalaimamani, Nataka Ratna, Nadigachoodamani, Nataka Kala Sironmani, best Actor Award from Mylapore Academy & many awards
Troupe	:	Stage Creations, started 1964
Family	:	Married to Meena Ramamurthy proud father of two children settled in USA
Hobbies	:	Acting Dramas, Seeing Dramas, Talking about Dramas
Ambition	:	To Act for another 50 years

Sri Krishna Sweets

nataka ACADEMY
Ph : 24617559

13th Nataka Utsav

Golden Jubilee Celebrations

of

Kathady S. Ramamurthy

Venue :

Narada Gana Sabha Hall A/c
T.T.K Salai, Chennai - 18

Date :

1.5.2004 to 9.5.2004

Soliciting your August Presence

R. Marimuthu
President

Raadhu
Secretary

1-5-2004 Saturday, 4.30 p.m

Inauguration

Lighting of Kuthuvilakku :
Padmasri Dr. Nalli Kuppusamy Chetty

Inauguration of 13th Nataka Utsav and Golden Jubilee of Kathady Ramamurthy
By
Shri. **CHO**

Felicitations : Shri. **R. Krishnaswamy**
Secretary, Narada Gana Sabha

Shri. **A. Natarajan**
Former Director, Doordarshan, Chennai

Shri. **R. Marimuthu**
President, Nataka Academy

Your presence our pleasure

5.00 p.m : Kathady Ramamurthy in
IRU VEEDUGAL (play)

6-5-2004 Thursday, 7.45 p.m

Honb'le Justice **K.S. Bakthavatchalam**
Presides

Iyakkunar Sigaram **K. Balachandar**

Honours **Kathady Ramamurthy**
For completing 50 years in stage

Felicitations : Shri. **Nagesh**

Shri. **Y.Gee. Mahendra**

Padmasri Dr. Nalli Kuppusamy Chetty

Shri. **L. Sabaretnam**
CEO, The India Cements

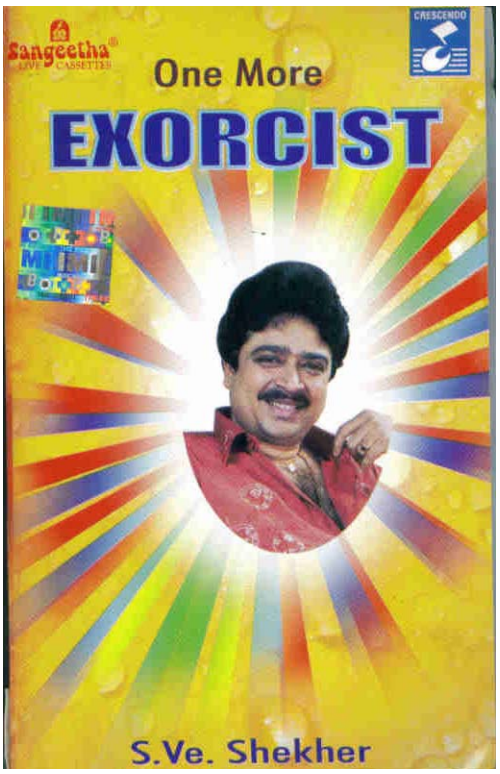
Shri. **karthick Rajagopal**

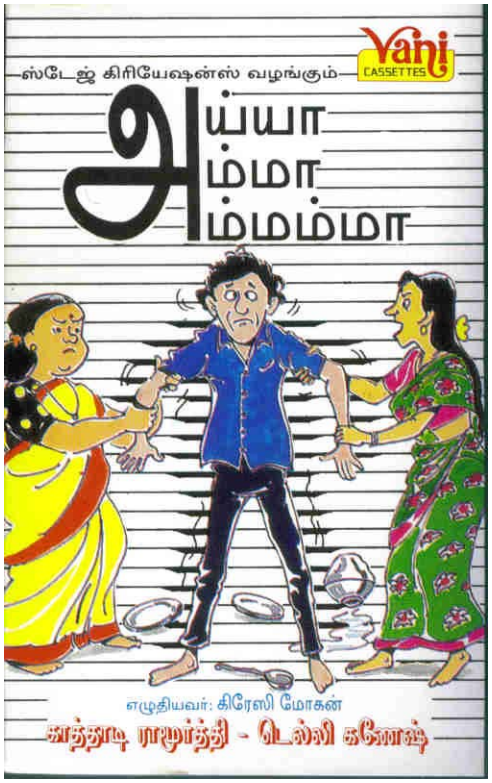
Join us in this celebration to honour the veteran Stage Artiste
Kathady

6.45 p.m. : Kathady Ramamurthy in
HONEY MOON COUPLE
(by Crazy Mohan)

Figure 4


Vani
CASSETTES
கிரேஸி மோகன் வழங்கும்
அலாவுதீனும்
100
வாட் பல்பும்


Sangeetha
CRESCENDO
One More
EXORCIST
S.Ve. Shekher


ஸ்டேஜ் கிரியேஷன்ஸ் வழங்கும்
Vani
CASSETTES
அய்யா
அம்மா
அம்மம்மா
எழுதியவர்: கிரேஸி மோகன்
காத்தாடி ராமூர்த்தி - டெல்லி கணேஷ்

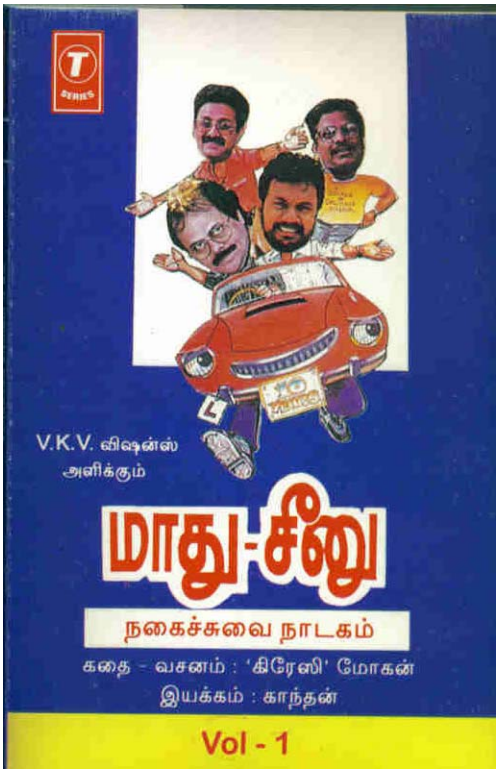
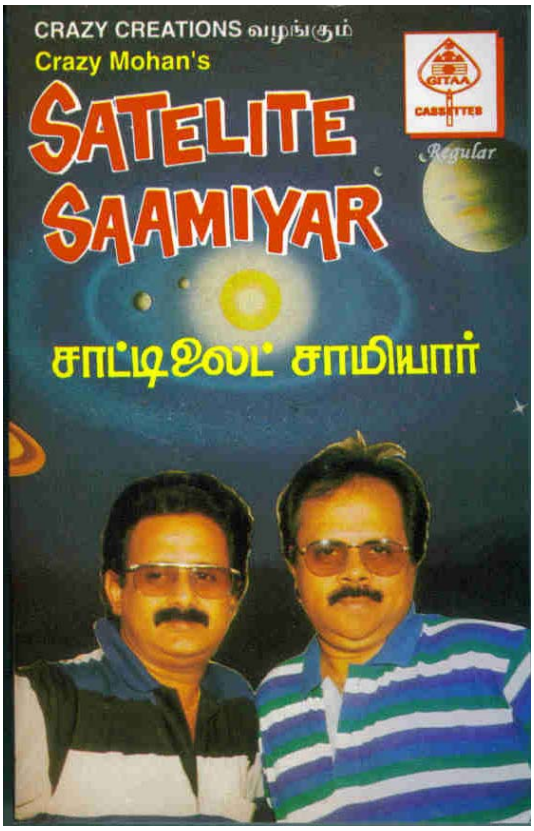
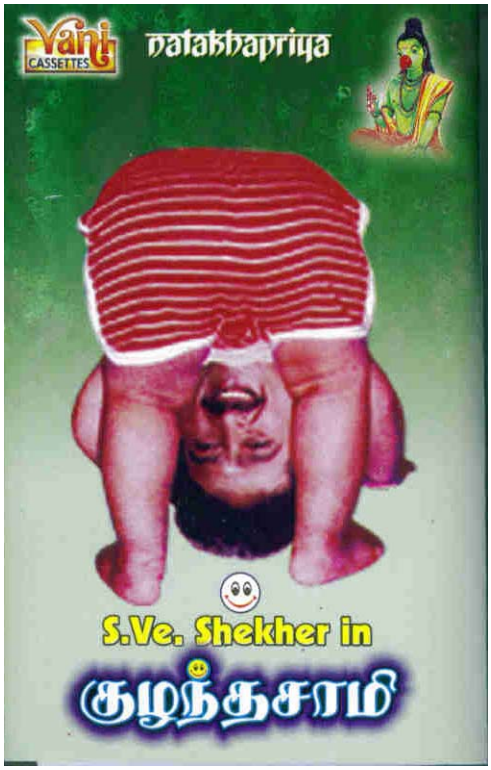

V.K.V. விஷன்ஸ்
அளிக்கும்
மாது-சீனு
நகைச்சுவை நாடகம்
கதை - வசனம் : 'கிரேஸி' மோகன்
இயக்கம் : காந்தன்
Vol - 1

Figure 5


கிரேஸி கிரியேஷன்ஸ்
Vani CASSETTES
மீசை ஆனால் மனைவி
கிரேஸி மோகன்


CRAZY CREATIONS வழங்கும்
Crazy Mohan's
SATELITE SAAMIYAR
GITAA CASSETTES
Regular
சாட்டிலைட் சாமியார்


Vani CASSETTES
ratakbapriya
S.Ve. Shekher in
குழந்தசாமி

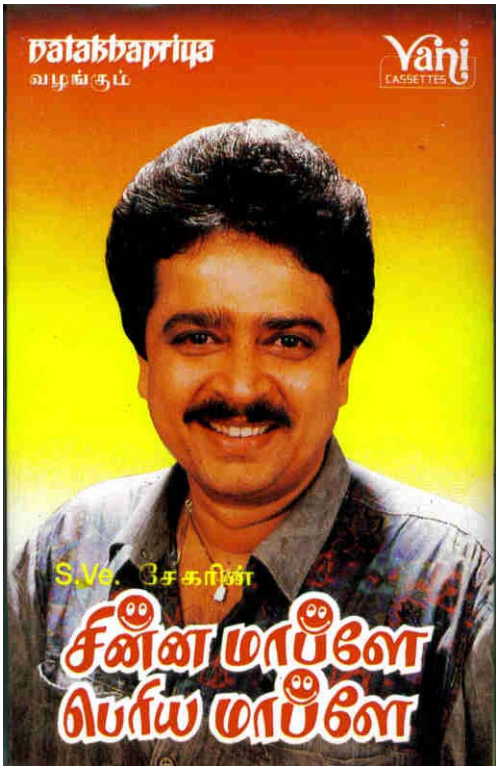

ratakbapriya
வழங்கும்
Vani CASSETTES
S.Ve. சேகரின்
சின்ன மாப்ளே
பெரிய மாப்ளே

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

Figure 11

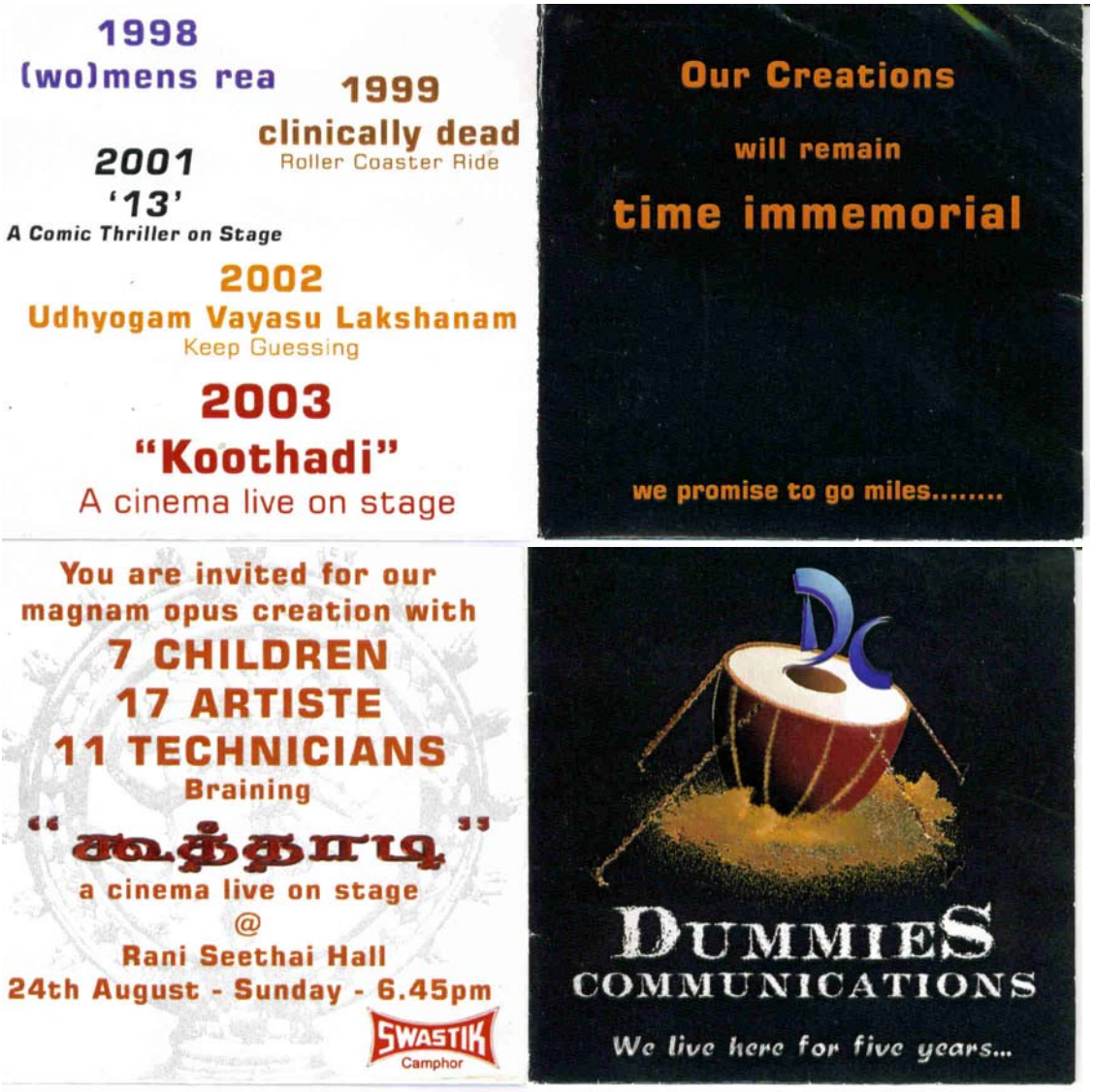
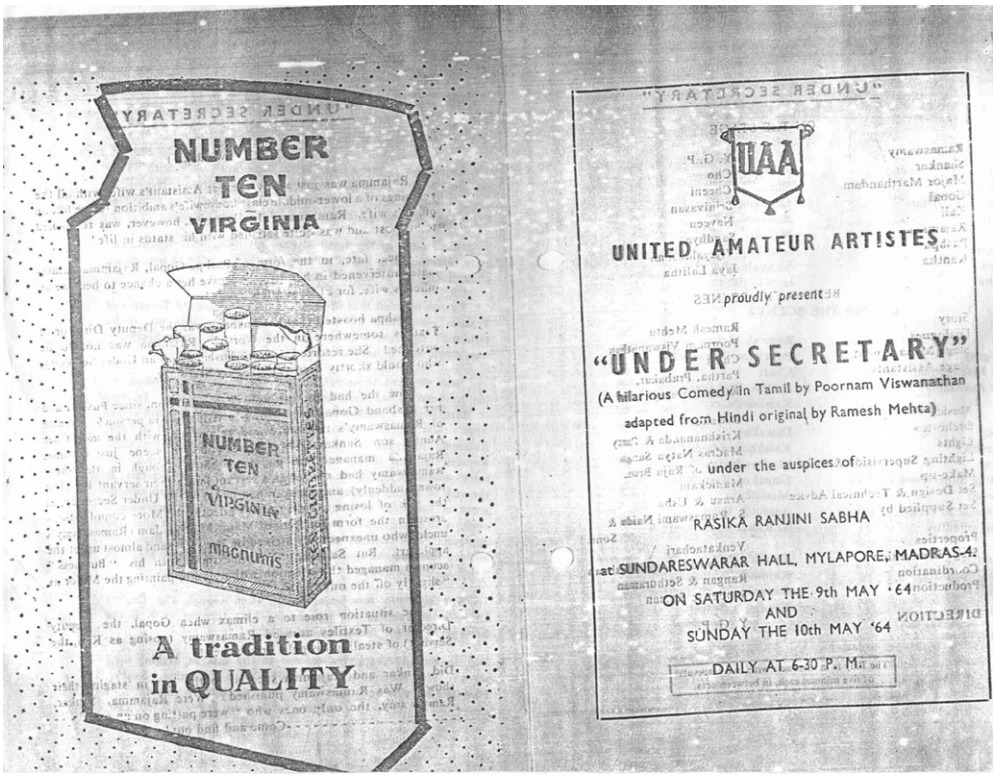
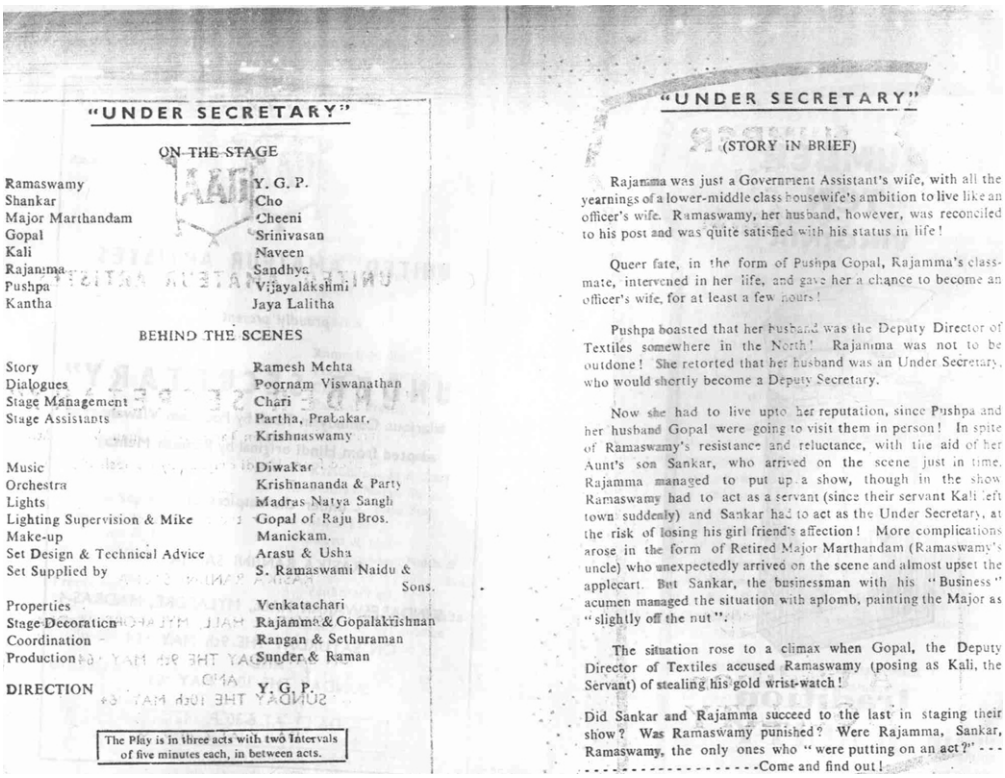

1998
(wo)mens rea
1999
clinically dead
Roller Coaster Ride
2001
'13'
A Comic Thriller on Stage
2002
Udhyogam Vayasu Lakshanam
Keep Guessing
2003
"Koothadi"
A cinema live on stage
Our Creations
will remain
time immemorial
we promise to go miles.....
You are invited for our
magnam opus creation with
7 CHILDREN
17 ARTISTE
11 TECHNICIANS
Braining
"கூத்தாடி"
a cinema live on stage
@
Rani Seethai Hall
24th August - Sunday - 6.45pm
SWASTIK
Camphor
DC
DUMMIES
COMMUNICATIONS
We live here for five years...

Figure 12





"UNDER SECRETARY"

ON THE STAGE

Ramaswamy	Y. G. P.
Shankar	Cho
Major Marthandam	Cheeni
Gopal	Srinivasan
Kali	Naveen
Rajanma	Sandhya
Pushpa	Vijayalakshmi
Kantha	Jaya Lalitha

BEHIND THE SCENES

Story	Ramesh Mehta
Dialogues	Poornam Viswanathan
Stage Management	Chari
Stage Assistants	Partha, Prabakar, Krishnaswamy
Music	Diwakar
Orchestra	Krishnananda & Party
Lights	Madras Natya Sangh
Lighting Supervision & Mike	Gopal of Raju Bros.
Make-up	Manickam.
Set Design & Technical Advice	Arasu & Usha
Set Supplied by	S. Ramaswami Naidu & Sons.
Properties	Venkatachari
Stage Decoration	Rajamma & Gopalakrishnan
Coordination	Rangan & Sethuraman
Production	Sunder & Raman
DIRECTION	Y. G. P.

The Play is in three acts with two Intervals of five minutes each, in between acts.

"UNDER SECRETARY"

(STORY IN BRIEF)

Rajanma was just a Government Assistant's wife, with all the yearnings of a lower-middle class housewife's ambition to live like an officer's wife. Ramaswamy, her husband, however, was reconciled to his post and was quite satisfied with his status in life!

Queer fate, in the form of Pushpa Gopal, Rajamma's class-mate, intervened in her life, and gave her a chance to become an officer's wife, for at least a few hours!

Pushpa boasted that her husband was the Deputy Director of Textiles somewhere in the North! Rajanma was not to be outdone! She retorted that her husband was an Under Secretary, who would shortly become a Deputy Secretary.

Now she had to live upto her reputation, since Pushpa and her husband Gopal were going to visit them in person! In spite of Ramaswamy's resistance and reluctance, with the aid of her Aunt's son Sankar, who arrived on the scene just in time, Rajamma managed to put up a show, though in the show Ramaswamy had to act as a servant (since their servant Kali left town suddenly) and Sankar had to act as the Under Secretary, at the risk of losing his girl friend's affection! More complications arose in the form of Retired Major Marthandam (Ramaswamy's uncle) who unexpectedly arrived on the scene and almost upset the applecart. But Sankar, the businessman with his "Business" acumen managed the situation with aplomb, painting the Major as "slightly off the nut".

The situation rose to a climax when Gopal, the Deputy Director of Textiles accused Ramaswamy (posing as Kali, the Servant) of stealing his gold wrist-watch!

Did Sankar and Rajamma succeed to the last in staging their show? Was Ramaswamy punished? Were Rajamma, Sankar, Ramaswamy, the only ones who "were putting on an act?" - Come and find out!

Figure 13


15th Kodai Nataka Vizha - 2004
at Mylapore Fine Arts Auditorium
Musiri Subramaniam Salai, Mylapore, Chennai-4, Daily 7.00 pm
24.4.2004 Saturday Kalalayam Coimbatore Inaugurate Nambikkai by Srinivasan
25.4.2004 Sunday Dummies Communications Inaugurate Vinodaya Chitham by Srivatsan
26.4.2004 Monday Railpriya Inaugurate Vambu Idhu Pudhusu by Ananthu
27.4.2004 Tuesday Nadakakaran Inaugurate Ezavathu Veedu by Bombay Kannan
28.4.2004 Wednesday Kalavathini inaugurate Vegam by Nannu
29.4.2004 Thursday Prayatna Inaugurate 3 point 42 by S.Mohamed absor
30.4.2004 Friday Anna University Cultural Group Dhiraviyam Thedi by G.Sivakumar
01.5.2004 Saturday Gurukulam Original Boys Co., Inaugurate Appa Vandahar by Madhava Boovaraga Moorthy
02.5.2004 Sunday Rathi Devi Fine Arts Inaugurate Santhosha Sangamam by Puduvai Mukundan
Chairman:
Shri L.Sabaretnam
President:
Shri A.V.S.Raja
Vice Presidents:
Shri M.N.Seshagiri
Shri A.V.Jayaram
Shri T.V.Srinivasan
Shri S.P.Mani
Shri K.M.Narasimhan
Secretaries
Shri R.Rajagopal
Shri M.R.Krishnamurthy
Treasurer
D.S.Ramanujam
Members:
Shri M.S.S.Manian
Shri N.Srinivasan
Shri V.Ganesh
Shri R.Venkatasubramaniam
Shri S.Chandrasekaran
Shri R.Sathiamurthy
Shri D.S.Rajagopalan
Shri R.Rangarajan
Shri S.Balashanker
Pondy Bazaar Ph: 24312345
Mylapore Ph: 28112827
Anna Nagar (E) Ph: 26191222
Ashok Nagar Ph: 24850808
Sri Krishna Sweets
PURE GHEE SWEETS
Adayar Ph : 24413805
Airport Ph : 55870736
Spencer Plaza : 52083818
Purasawalkam : 26616667

Figure 14


PASS PASS
Mobile: 98410 - 52165
Abi, SRI DEVI FINE ARTS
29-7-2001 ஞாயிறு மாலை 6.45 மணி
கலைவாணர்அரங்கம் A/C
காமெடி கிங் S.Ve. சேகர் நடிக்கும்
ஒன் மோர்
எக்ஸ்ட்ராஸிஸ்டோல்
(புதிய குபீர்...குபீர் சிரிப்பு நாடகம்)
Rs. 75/-
ROW
SEAT
0
46
SOWBAGHYA®
The Grinder People
அன்றும்... இன்றும்... என்றும் உங்களுக்காகவே
QUEEN®
BRA

Figure 15


Golden Jubilee
50
UAA
UAA GOLDEN JUBILEE
After the success of "JUDGEMENT DAY"
Y.Gee.Mahendra presents
UBHADESAM SEIVATHU UAA
Written by Venkat
Dramatised & Directed by Y.Gee.Mahendra
A 5 in 1 Comedy
- Rich with Purposeful Humour
Through unique stories from Satya Sai Baba, Osho,
The Gita & Zen Buddhism
VISION CARE
Now Adyar and Ashok Nagar showrooms open on Sundays also.
The best of world class eye care
Come only to the genuine
Only at Adyar, Ashok Nagar & Chetpet
No.1, Padmanabha Nagar, Besant Avenue, Adyar, Chennai - 600 020.
Ph : 24913812 / 13 Telefax : 24917380
No.75, 1st Avenue, Ashok Nagar, Chennai - 600 083. Ph : 24710159
No.23, Spurtank Road, Heavitree Building, Chetpet, Chennai - 600 031.
Ph : 28360921, 28362084 www.visioncare-india.com
Produced by Madhu Enterprises
www.ygeem.com
Tel : 2822 3045 / 2823 6164

Figure 16

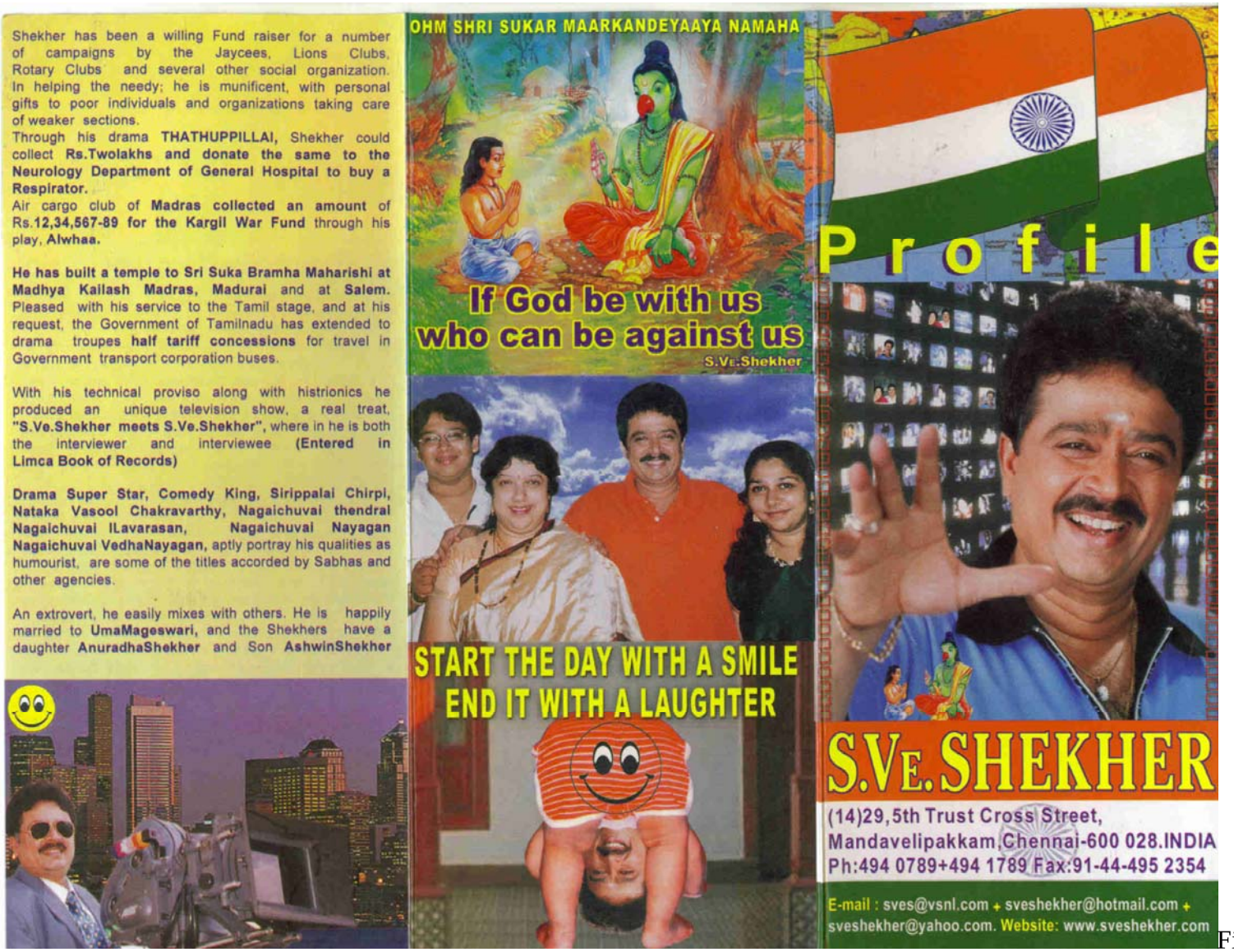
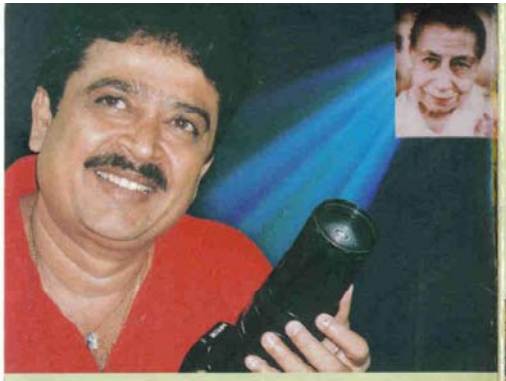
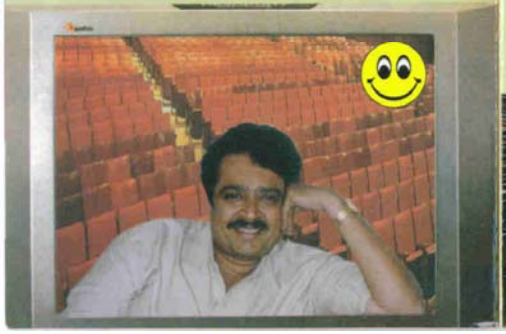

Shekher has been a willing Fund raiser for a number of campaigns by the Jaycees, Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs and several other social organization. In helping the needy; he is munificent, with personal gifts to poor individuals and organizations taking care of weaker sections.
Through his drama THATHUPPILLAI, Shekher could collect Rs.Twolakhs and donate the same to the Neurology Department of General Hospital to buy a Respirator.
Air cargo club of Madras collected an amount of Rs.12,34,567-89 for the Kargil War Fund through his play, Alwhaa.
He has built a temple to Sri Suka Bramha Maharishi at Madhya Kailash Madras, Madurai and at Salem.
Pleased with his service to the Tamil stage, and at his request, the Government of Tamilnadu has extended to drama troupes half tariff concessions for travel in Government transport corporation buses.
With his technical proviso along with histrionics he produced an unique television show, a real treat, "S.Ve.Shekher meets S.Ve.Shekher", where in he is both the interviewer and interviewee (Entered in Limca Book of Records)
Drama Super Star, Comedy King, Sirippalai Chirpi, Nataka Vasool Chakravarthy, Nagaichuvai thendral Nagaichuvai ILavarasan, Nagaichuvai Nayagan Nagaichuvai VedhaNayagan, aptly portray his qualities as humourist, are some of the titles accorded by Sabhas and other agencies.
An extrovert, he easily mixes with others. He is happily married to UmaMageswari, and the Shekhers have a daughter AnuradhaShekher and Son AshwinShekher
OHM SHRI SUKAR MAARKANDEYAAYA NAMAHA
If God be with us
who can be against us
S.Ve.Shekher
START THE DAY WITH A SMILE
END IT WITH A LAUGHTER
Profile
S.VE.SHEKHER
(14)29,5th Trust Cross Street,
Mandavelipakkam,Chennai-600 028.INDIA
Ph:494 0789+494 1789 Fax:91-44-495 2354
E-mail : sves@vsnl.com + sveshekher@hotmail.com + sveshekher@yahoo.com. Website: www.sveshekher.com

Figure 17a



Playwright, television, film and theatre artist playing lead roles, **S.Ve.SHEKER** is a household name with Tamil connoisseurs, renowned for his punch, pun, ready wit and humour, his hold over the realm of performing arts since 1974 is commendable.

Sattanathapuram Venkataraman Shekher, S.Ve.SHEKHER for short, is a Diploma holder in Mechanical Engineering with a post-Diploma in AirConditioning and Refrigeration. He is also a **sound recordist, programme producer, still Photographer, Videographer, Editor and director.** An expert in broadcasting, sound effects and theatrics,he won the **Best All India Programme Producer Award** for four years in a row from Radio & TV Advertising Practitioners Association of India Limited.



As a Photographer, his colour transparencies have adorned the cover pages of popular Tamil Magazines. While his technical skills should have kept him at the rear of the stage or behind the lens, his creative literary talents have ushered him onto the front-stage. Encouraged by the success of a singapore drama tour in 1974,he formed his drama troupe **NATAKHAPRIYA** which has so far staged **twenty three plays commanding over 4300** shows.On an invitation from Tamil population of **Dubai, Abudhabi, Srilanka, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia** and **Thailand** he had staged full length dramas successfully.

It is a matter of pride and first of its kind that S.Ve.Shekher was invited to **USA** to play the lead role in his drama **"Periya Thambe"** with the local talents at Washington and New Jersey.

He created history in staging full length dramas with all the members of his troupe in **USA,** a total of **28 shows in 32 days.**

Shekher's teleserials **Vannakkolangal Namkudumbam & TaxiTaxi** created sensation warranting retelecastas as serial, attracting the young and old alike to the small screen. **Staging eight full length plays at one go, from 7.47am to 1.49 am of the following day.**

Shekher performed a record of sorts in April 1985. While this is acknoweledged an unsurpassed feat of a stage artiste in the **Limca Book of Records,** shekher credits this to his audience and fellow artists.

Shekher made his debut in the celluloid in 1980 with Director K.Balachander's **'Varumaiyin Niram Sigappu'** and since then has acted in 90 Tamil films. The Mylapore Academy adjudged him **THE BEST COMEDIAN** for three years in succession; Magazine **WISDOM** chose him as the 1990's Best Comedian; the Jaycees honoured him as **THE OUTSTANDING YOUTH.**

Award galore, the state's prestigious **KALAIVANAR AWARD** and the Tamilnadu Iyal Isai Nataka Manram's **KALAIMAAMANI AWARD** and **BEST DRAMA TROUPE AWARD** have only made him much more committed and devoted to the realm of arts and the Society.

Shekher is a blood donor, having donated more than 40 times. The Lions Club's International presented him the singular honour award in recognition of his production of two television episodes on **Eye Donation and Blood Donation.**

Figure 17b

APPENDIX A

PRICES OF HALL RENTAL IN CHENNAI IN 2001[1]

HALL	(APPROXIMATE) # OF SEATS	(APPROXIMATE) RENT PER SHOW (in rupees)
1. Anna Auditorium*	1604	5000
2. Bharathiya Vidya Bhawan	500	2500
3. German Hall	600	3500
4. Kalaivanar Arangam*	1040	4000
5. Kamaraj Memorial Hall	1720	10000
6. Krishna Gana Sabha*	900	1350
7. Music Academy	1693	9000[2]
8. Museum Theatre	500	3000[3]
9. Mylapore Fine Arts Club*	1000	2000
10. Narada Gana Sabha*	1040	7000
11. N. K. T. Kalamandapam	Open Air	
12. Raja Annamalai Hall*	880	3500
13. Rani Seethai Hall*	640	3500
14. Rama Rao Kala Mandap	800	7000
15. R. R. Sabha*	980	1400
16. Sankaradas Auditorium	1014	2500
17. University Centenary Auditorium	3200	25000
18. Vani Mahal*[4]	1000	3000

[1] This list is taken from *Natakapriya 4001*. [in Tamil] (A Souvenir on the Occasion of Natakapriya's 4001st performance.) January 1, 2001.

* These halls are commonly used for sabha drama performances.

[2] I was told by K. S. Narayan on October 10, 2003 that the Music Academy rented for 30,000 rupees a day.

[3] I was told by K. S. Narayan on October 10, 2003 that the Museum Theater rented for 12,500 rupees a day and he expected the rent to be raised to 18,000 rupees soon.

[4] This hall has undergone extensive renovations since 2001, including the installation of air conditioning, and I expect that its rent has gone up considerably.

APPENDIX B

Sabhas that regularly sponsored dramas in 1992[5]

1. Nungambakkam Cultural Academy
2. Prabhat Cultural
3. Rageswari Fine Arts
4. Sri Kapali fine Arts
5. Friends Cultural Academy
6. Narada Gana Sabha
7. Brahma Gana Sabha
8. Om Vighneswara Cultural Academy
9. Sri Krishna Gana Sabha
10. Kalarasana
11. Sree Vaari Fine Arts
12. Madras Social and Cultural Academy
13. Chromepet Cultural Academy
14. Ten Stars Academy
15. Shastri Bhawan Fine Arts
16. Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha
17. Swapnam
18. Venu Gana Sabha
19. Salangai Arts
20. VGN Cultural Academy
21. Rasika Ranjani Sabha
22. Mylapore Fine Arts Academy
23. Bharat Kalachar
24. Mylapore Arts Academy
25. Shobana cultural
26. Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha
27. Abbas
28. Golden
29. Senthil Fine Arts
30. Priya
31. Sri Devi
32. Karthikeya
33. Popular
34. Padhmalaya
35. Evening Entertainers
36. Kartik Fine Arts
37. Favourite Cultural Academy
38. Elango Kalai Manram
39. Friends Paradise
40. Nagarathar Cultural Academy
41. AAA

[5] List compiled by the author from *The Hindu* events listings from 1992.

42. TVK Cultural Academy
43. Alankar
44. Esther Fine Arts
45. Angel
46. Thiruvalluvar Kalai Manram
47. Balajee Fine Arts
48. Youth Paradise
49. ARFI
50. Mullai Kalai Manram
51. Balamurugan Gardens Thuraippakkam
52. Tamilnadu Eyal Isai Nataka Mandram
53. Jupiter Cultural Academy
54. Nataka Mandir
55. Sumangali
56. Aroobam
57. Sai Arts Club
58. Bhavan’s Fine Arts
59. Tiam House
60. Kalaranjini
61. Raju
62. Welcome Fine Arts
63. Mugavai
64. Alandur
65. VKR Exnora Cultural Academy
66. Amara Gana Sabha
67. Kalavagini
68. Perambur Sangeetha Sabha
69. Tamilnadu Cinema Kalai Mandram
70. NKT
71. Southern Arts
72. Kolam
73. Kolam Yavanika
74. Kalalaya
75. Gowri
76. Raju Cine Dramalaya
77. Mathi Arts
78. Gokul Arts
79. Tamilannai Cultural Academy
80. United India Sports and Recreation Club
81. Kolam Aikya
82. Sri Semmanari Andavan Trust
83. Classic Creators
84. Marrumalarchi Arts Academy

APPENDIX C

Sabhas that regularly sponsored dramas in 2004[6]

1. Kalarasana
2. Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha
3. Abi
4. Sri Devi Fine Arts
5. Narada Gana Sabha
6. Southern Arts
7. Shastri Bhawan Fine Arts
8. Brahma Gana Sabha
9. Rasika Fine Arts
10. Sri Krishna Gana Sabha
11. Mylapore Fine Arts Club
12. Abbas
13. Alandur Fine Arts
14. Aaha
15. Kartik Fine Arts
16. Welcome Fine Arts
17. Chromepet Cultural Academy
18. Bharat Kalachar
19. Sri Thyaga Brahma Gana Sabha
20. Prabhat
21. Abhinaya
22. TVK Cultural
23. Arasu Arts
24. Priya Cultural Academy
25. Sree Vaari Fine Arts
26. Hamsadhvani
27. Rasika Ranga
28. South Zone Cultural Center
29. Nungambakkam Cultural Academy Trust
30. Vani Mahal
31. Madhu Enterprises
32. Rasika Ranjani Sabha
33. Elango
34. Tamilnadu Cinema Kalai Mandram
35. Mayura Cine Tel
36. Naadakakkaaran
37. L. Ve. Creators
38. TNCA
39. SVS
40. Nataka Academy

[6] List compiled by the author from *The Hindu* events listings from 2004.

41. VKV Visions
42. Sri Muthukrishna Swami Mission Trust

APPENDIX D

Honeymoon Couple

A Kathadi Ramamurthy play written by Crazy Mohan
Translation from Tamil unpublished manuscript, 1971, by Kristen Rudisill in 2004[7]

Scene 1

Place: Ramani's House

Characters: Rukmani, Dilip, Nandini, Ramani, Rahottaman

(Morning time. Ramani is sleeping in a chair, covered with a blanket. Rukmani comes in.)

Ruk: Nandini! Get up. It's late. (Looks inside.) Dilip! Come on! (Dilip comes.) Did you bathe?

Dil: Oh, I brushed my teeth, bathed, *and* said my morning prayers!

Ruk: You are ready. Your dad got up, too, brushed his teeth, and left. But Nandini is still sleeping! Nandini! Wake up!

(Nandini calls from inside.)

Nan: Hey, Mom! Why are you yelling so much? I already got up, brushed my teeth, and bathed. I'm ready for the morning.

Ruk: Nandini! Are you ready? And Dilip, you're also up! Then who is sleeping here?

Dil: Yes. Nandini is ready. Mom, you are, too. I am also ready. Then who is lying here?

Ruk: Yes. This is like a big Quiz Program. Take away the blanket and then you'll know! Take it!

Dil: (taking the blanket) Hey!...Dad!

Ruk: Do you see this, Dilip? He got up from there, came here, and lay down! What's he smiling about?

Dil: If you smile in your sleep, it means God is showing you flowers.

Ruk: Why, he's getting up!

(Ramani gets up.)

[7] With special thanks for the assistance of Pritham Chakravarty and Sankaran Radhakrishnan.

Ram: Rukmani! I was lying down inside in the bedroom! How did I get here?

Ruk: I woke you up there. Then you came here to Nandini's bed and lay down!

Ram: Are you so smart? You woke me up at dawn and I was half asleep. I came into the living room and saw this chair and laid down here. And that's not all—I could have gone straight to the neighbor's bedroom and lay down. What would that lady have thought about me then? Forget about me. What would her husband have thought about *her*?

Dil: Dad, you were smiling in your sleep. What did God show you?

Ram: He showed me a purple flower. Hey, why were you sitting holding your nose for ten minutes this morning?

Dil: If you do that, your intelligence will grow.

Ram: Your intelligence will grow? If you look at the grades you got in math this term, you'd never know your intelligence was growing!

Dil: Dad, I've been telling you for a week that today is the last day to pay my college fees. Give me money.

Ram: Don't worry, Dilip! Inside the bureau on the bottom shelf on the left hand side in the back is a gold chain of your mother's…

Ruk: Ayyayyo! That chain is the only thing not pledged! Would you give it also to the pawn shop?

Ram: Why are you so hasty? I've already pledged that chain and taken 400 rupees for it. You take 200 rupees from that and give me the remaining 200 for my expenses. (Dilip leaves.) Rukmani! Do you remember one thing?

Ruk: Do *I* remember?

Ram: What?

Ruk: You still haven't brushed your teeth!

Ram: Not that. When I came to look at you for marriage you sang a song. A good song. A rare raga! What was it called?...Oh, yes! Bukari!

Ruk: Dear Lord! That's not Bukari, some non-vegetarian raga. What are you babbling about? Go brush your teeth.

Ram: No, really…Bukari…

Ruk: Idiot. Not Bukari. *Mu*kari.

Ram: Oh…Mukari.

Ruk: I didn't know then that if I sang the Mukari Raga, full of sorrow and pathos, in that auspicious hour that my whole life would become Mukari also.

Ram: Rukku, Rukku. How old are you now?

Ruk: Why ask so suddenly now?

Ram: You first then I'll tell you.

Ruk: What? I'm 38.

Ram: I'm telling you truthfully, Rukku. No one could say you look more than 28.

Ruk: Oh, go on…

Ram: Rukku…How old is the lady across the street?

Ruk: Yes…I also have been watching. For two days, what is this? You keep talking and talking about the lady across the street. Why?

Ram: (immediately) Do you doubt me? I'm just making a comparison…She is about your age, but she looks like a 60 year old woman.

Ruk: Yes…Now what is your sudden obsession with age?

Ram: Nothing…Rukku…You asked why I was smiling in my sleep this morning…I dreamt that you and I were going on a honeymoon.

Ruk: You have a daughter who's old enough to be married! Don't you have any shame? Dreaming about going on a honeymoon!

Ram: Why is that so crazy? It just came to me in a dream. What could I do? I sleep for that. If you prepare and think, "I shouldn't see all these kind of dreams," you can sleep…What dreams will come? Very rare dreams…Do you know where you and I went on our honeymoon? Simla. There is a Hotel Paradise there with twenty floors. One room had been reserved for us, Rukmani and Ramani, on the 18th floor.

Ruk: Why—was your dream in black and white or color?

Ram: It was in good Eastman color, crazy girl. As if we could get prints at Gemini Color Labs. I was wearing double knit pants and a terracotta colored shirt. You weren't wearing this kind of cotton sari, but a georgette chiffon sari.

Ruk: What was the design on the pallu?

Ram: Who do you think is paying attention to all that? Why don't you listen to me fully? You and I were sitting on the 18th floor in an air-conditioned room, then you said that you wanted ice cream!

Ruk: So you immediately pledged the gold chain I'd brought from my parent's house to buy ice cream for me. So…

Ram: For shame. I had bundles and bundles of notes in my pockets.

Ruk: Why?

Ram: Because in my dream last night someone came and gave it to me to go on the honeymoon.

Ruk: Oh. So this is a conclusion of last night's dream…

Ram: Listen…I was having a rare and beautiful dream…at that time, your father came and spoiled it.

Ruk: My father?

Ram: You asked for ice cream and I immediately rang the bell to tell the boy to bring ice cream. Immediately the door opened and the hotel server came. As soon as I saw him come smiling, I couldn't control my laughter. Full six feet tall, absolutely black—your father! Why had he come to Simla? Must be my bad karma.

Ruk: Enough. Just so you can insult my father you tell some stupid lie and say you had some *dream.* It's 7:30…you haven't gone to office…there is still a little time before your friend Rahottaman comes. Go bathe and you can be on your way.

Ram: Rahottaman won't come today because there is office leave.

Ruk: Leave? Why would there be leave today?

Ram: Today is Gokulakshmi, Krishna Jayanti.

Ruk: Krishna Jayanti? That was last week. It's over.

Ram: Crazy woman…It was over last week for Ram, but for our company manager Jagannathan…Raoji…for all Madhvas…*today* is Krishna Jayanti.

Ruk: Why do you tell these lies only to not go to the office? Yesterday I went to your manager's house since his wife had been inviting me to come home for a long time. If it had been Krishna Jayanti wouldn't she have put out Krishna's little footprints? I looked, but didn't see anything.

Ram: Fool. The manager lives in a Housing Board building on the 15th floor. If she started to put Krishna's footprints from the ground up to their portion on the 15th floor it would be impossible. So just for ritual's sake she would put one in the puja room—you wouldn't have seen it.

Ruk: I don't believe you. You are always taking leave from office. One day they will just send you home.

Ram: He won't send me—definitely won't send me. It should be like this, Rukku: One day you wake up in the morning and look in the paper. It should be there that, "No one needs to come to office." It should be. Ayyo…

Ruk: Why are you talking like this? If you don't go to the office, what about money? If there's no money, how can we take care of our children?

Ram: This office, money, all these are things created by us…So what if there's no money? "The one who planted the tree will provide the water."

Ruk: Nevermind about the tree…it will draw up water from the earth. But you are just some small shrub earning a 1500 rupee a month salary and will just…disappear.

Ram: Okay. Just leave it. Today I have office leave. Shall we go for some matinee show? I'll go and bathe, then come. Did you cook something good, Dear?

Ruk: Do you really have office leave?

Ram: Okay, Dear. If you doubt me, we will take this under consideration. Every day my friend Rahottaman comes to collect me to go to the office.

Ruk: Yes…

Ram: He won't come today. Suppose he comes…then the office must be open today. All right?

(Ramani goes to bathe and Rahottaman comes in.)

Ruk: You? He said you wouldn't come today!

Rah: I won't come? What is this nonsense?

Ruk: He said the office was closed today—leave…

Rah: Office leave? What's today? Why should there be leave?

Ruk: He said your manager Jagannathan Rao…celebrates Krishna Jayanti today.

Rah: He would say that…you believe what he says. If today is Krishna Jayanti, tomorrow he'll say that it's Ramadan in Jagannathan's house if it seems like you'll believe it and he'll get to take leave!

Ruk: What about later…you won't come…How dare he tell me that if Rahottaman comes it will mean that there is office today?

Rah: *Now* I understand—this is why he told me I didn't need to come today!

Ruk: He told you not to come?

Rah: Yes, Rukmani. He told me yesterday, "Rahottaman, you don't need to come tomorrow. I will come straight to the office." I didn't listen to why…He said you have some uncle in Mambalam?

Ruk: Yes. Sambasiva Uncle…my mother's younger brother. He has great affection for me; even at this age he comes daily from Mambalam to see me.

Rah: Well, he won't come visit you any longer.

Ruk: Why not?

Rah: Yesterday morning at 10 o'clock he had a sudden heart attack and died.

Ruk: What nonsense! Sambasiva Uncle died yesterday morning at 10 o'clock? I saw him yesterday evening!

Rah: You saw him in the evening?! I didn't know all that…yesterday morning 10 o'clock…What to say? If you saw him yesterday evening—Ramani said that and left. That jerk.

Ruk: He's getting worse and worse. What bald-faced lie won't he tell to get out of going to work?

Rah: Thieving rascal! He told me your uncle had died and today you had to go see your aunt and five cousins to offer your condolences.

Ruk: That's also a lie. My aunt died at 10.

Rah: What is this, Rukmani? You're confusing me. Your aunt died at 10? Then how did she have five children?

Ruk: Ayyo. My aunt died when *I* was 10.

Rah: That liar! He tried to deceive me…Rukmani, go call your husband and tell him he's bathed enough. NO. You wait here. *I'll* go and call him. That cheat…

(Ramani comes out drying his hair with a towel.)

Ram: What, Rukku? Is breakfast ready? Which film should we see today?

Ruk: A Thousand Lies.[8]

Ram: "A Thousand Lies"? That's an old film! Okay, if that's what you want. Where is it playing?

Ruk: Truth Theater.[9]

Ram: "A Thousand Lies" at Truth Theater? Listen to that Rukku! You said "A Thousand Lies" is playing at the *Truth* Theater…that's not funny.

Ruk: A few people are just like that. From the outside they look like truthful people, but inside their hearts are a thousand lies.

Ram: Rukku…Don't talk with Dilip so much…you are starting to speak philosophically, too.

Ruk: Oh. So the office is really closed today?

Ram: Crazy woman. If I had to go to the office today, Rahottaman would have come by this time. He didn't come, so there is office leave.

(Rahottaman comes up behind him.)

Rah: Say that to me one more time.

Ram: Rahottaman didn't come, so there is office…(turns around) You…you…Rahottaman.

Rah: I'm not God. You lying rascal. You lied about office leave. According to that…Krishna Jayanti at our manager's house?! (in Ramani's voice) That's not it, Rukku, darling, this is Govalakshmi, Sita, Murugan, anyone……

[8] *Aiyram Poi* ("A Thousand Lies") is a real film from 1972.
[9] This is "Satyam" Theater, one of the biggest cinema theaters in Madras.

Ruk: And he said you told him that Sambasiva Uncle died?

Ram: Yes, dear. Sambasiva Uncle is gone. He said…Che! That's not right…

Rah: Rukmani, it's not good for this Ramani to waste time like this. He's frequently taking leave from the office…He's taken all his leave plus 20 or 25 days with loss of pay. And he *still* takes leave! Soon he'll have to give a salary to the company! (Takes a diary out of his bag.) Ramani, look at this.

Ruk: What is this?

Rah: Diary. I've written in this when Ramani has taken leave…and why…and having taken the leave, where he goes. I've taken notes on all this. This is my personal diary.

Ram: If you're writing all about other people's affairs, how can it be a "personal diary"?

Rah: Listen to what I've written: January 15, half day leave. Reason: Sambasiva Uncle died of typhoid. March 8: Sambasiva Uncle died of pneumonia. May 6: The same Sambasiva Uncle who died of pneumonia has died again. June 2: Sambasiva Uncle has died a natural death. Now it seems like the fellow doesn't know any more disease names than that.

Ruk: Good Lord! What would Sambasiva Uncle think if he knew about this?

Rah: The same Sambasiva Uncle has died 4 times. Lazy, lying fellow. Start for the office now.

Ram: Rahottaman. I'm going to office. Why are you worrying that I won't? It seems like you must have been an Ayah in a past life, escorting children to and from school.

Ruk: If you keep taking leave like this, they will send you out.

Rah: That's exactly why he does it, Rukku. If he resigns, he's afraid of how much you will scold him. So he does this, then what can they do but send him packing?

Ram: Go, Rukku. I'm fed up with this office life.

Rah: He said the same thing to me. Do you know what this man wants? It should be office leave every day. Then he said he would take you to a film or drama and enjoy life. And you know what else he's been saying? Now he's dreaming daily about taking you on a honeymoon.

Ram: Hey! Sh! Don't say all that…I'm embarrassed.

Rah: Beats me. 45 years old and this shy…

Ruk: Daily you are dreaming about going on a honeymoon like this…for just one day why don't you lie down and dream about going to the office…

Rah: Okay, okay, it's late. Let's see about getting on our way.

Ram: ….! …..! Please….I was already thinking of today as a holiday in my mind. Don't spoil my mood—from today I'll come regularly to the office…

Rah: I will kill you. Let's go.

Dilip: Dad, here's your tiffin box.

Ruk: Buttermilk rice with pickle. Eat well!

Ram: Get out, Rukku. I'm bored with eating this buttermilk rice. Why don't you make poori or chapatti for a change?

Rah: I have poori and chapatti. This is just some excuse. Come on, let's go.

Ram: Today it was in the paper…did you see it? There's going to be a big thunderstorm today. Should we go to the office in all this rain?

Rah: I have an umbrella. Let's go.

APPENDIX E

Mohammad Bin Tughlaq

A 1968 play by Cho Ramasamy, published as *Mohammad bin Tughlaq* by Alliance Press in Madras in 1995.
Translation from Tamil by Kristen Rudisill in 2001 with the assistance of Sankaran Radhakrishnan.

Scene 4

Place: Professor Rangachari's House
Characters: Srimati, Tatachari, Rangachari, Indira, Narasimhachari, Tughlaq, Ibn Battuta, Pattu, four reporters

Sri: (on the telephone) Who is this? Saru? Yes, Saru! Tughlaq has come to our house…Yes, the story in the paper is true. Don't come now! The press conference is going to happen now. I'll talk to you afterwards. (Makes another phone call.) Who is this? Lakshmi? What, Lakshmi?...Oh, nothing, I just called. Have you seen the paper?...Yes, Tughlaq has come. Ayyayyo! Don't come now. The press conference is about to happen. I'll talk to you afterwards. (Makes another phone call.) Is this Mangalam? Mangalam, did you read the paper? You didn't? Che! Get out! It's nothing. (Hangs up the phone.)

Tata: What? Who are you angry with on the telephone?

Sri: She said she hadn't read the paper. That's a lie. She's just jealous because she knows that Tughlaq has come to our house. So she'll pretend she doesn't know. This Mangalam is very jealous.

Ran: Srimati! Many people have come for Tughlaq's press conference. Have you made all the arrangements?

Sri: Let them come, let them come. It's not as if I'll let them get to Tughlaq immediately.

Ran: Ayyayyo! Aren't you going to let the members of the press see Tughlaq?

Sri: I didn't say the members of the press. I am just saying this Mangalam. She said she didn't read the paper. She'll come and say "Where is he, where is he?" And then I'll tell her to go and read the paper before coming. I am not going to talk to Mangalam anymore.

Ind: (runs in carrying coffee)

Nara: (coming) Who's the coffee for?

Ind: It's not for you; it's for Tughlaq.

Tugh: Here, I have come.

Pat: (following) Sir! Now do you accept it?

Tugh: Patmanabhan! Leave me in peace a little.

Pat: Hey Indira! Tughlaq agreed. He says Dilip Kumar is useless.

Ind: Did you really say that, Sir?

Pat: I'll ask in front of you. Sir! Have you seen Dilip Kumar's acting?

Tugh: No.

Pat: See? Your perfect Dilip Kumar! This man says he hasn't seen Dilip Kumar's acting.

Ind: Sir! Have you seen Raj Kapoor's acting?

Tugh: No.

Ind: See? See?

Pat: But he didn't see Dilip Kumar's acting first! Only after that he didn't see Raj Kapoor's acting.

Ind: So Dilip Kumar is first in that, too!

Pat: Sir, if a film was made on Tughlaq, who would you want to play your role? Only Raj Kapoor.

Ind: If Raj Kapoor wore Tughlaq's costume he would look like Battuta!

Batt: Why are you dragging me into this argument unnecessarily?

Pat: Be quiet, Sir. At least if Raj Kapoor put on a Tughlaq costume, he'd look like Battuta. If Dilip Kumar put it on he'd look like our father!

Ran: Okay, time to stop…Tughlaq, it's time for the press conference. Tughlaq, Battuta, I seriously underestimated you two. You learned everything that has happened in the last 600 years in only four days.

Tugh: That doesn't show that we're smart. It shows that you only have four days worth of stories to show for the last 600 years.

Ran: Here. You'll need this if you want to take any notes during the press conference. Take this pen.

Tata: You don't want that. That pen will get ink all over your hand. Take this one. It's an old Blackbird, made in England. Whatever else, a white man is always a white man.

Batt: You seem to be infatuated by the English.

Tata: You need to accept the facts. How was our country during the British period!

Tugh: How was it?

Tata: During the British period a measure of rice cost 8 annas, or about 50 paisa. Now one measure costs two rupees.

Tugh: Oh! So the difference between the British period and now is about 1 rupee!

Nara: Leave it, just leave it…Tatachari is always eulogizing the British! We got our independence—but that's nothing to this man.

Tata: Get out…inflation is rising, there's corruption everywhere.

Batt: So at that time there was no corruption?

Tata: We didn't know about any.

Tugh: So you're saying that if corruption goes on, it needs to be done without the people knowing.

(Four press people enter.)

Ran: Please come in. This man here is Tughlaq. If you see four reporters that is enough, I decided. This man is Tughlaq. That one is Battuta.

Rep1: Hello.

Tugh: Hello.

Batt: Hello, please sit down.

Ran: Let's start!

Rep1: How did you stay alive for so long? I have my doubts about whether or not you are really Tughlaq.

Batt: It is his right to doubt.

Rep2: He is always like this, just asking something. Please answer this question. Why did you throw those herbs in the river?

Batt: So that we would be the only ones to know the secret of our herbs.

Rep2: That's acceptable. It's not recorded in history that you know Tamil.

Tugh: I saw a magazine article recently that claimed that Shah Jahan didn't build the Taj Mahal. So little is known now that your history is all nonsense.

Rep3: Then is everything our children study at school just nonsense?

Tugh: You can understand that much just by looking at your sons.

Rep3: Okay, but should students be able to get involved in politics?

Tugh: Government is like a sewer. Whatever wants to can get mixed up in it.

Rep3: You talk as if you don't care about students!

Tugh: I'm a politician.

Rep4: What do you think about Hindi becoming the national language?

Tugh: That's one way for it to improve.

Rep4: For what to improve?

Tugh: Hindi. Besides this, there is no other way for that language to improve.

Rep4: But how can the country improve?

Tugh: Not by language.

Rep4: But don't we need *some* language to be the "national language"?

Tugh: The best way is to have a language be the national language for a month.

Rep4: One language a month?

Tugh: What's wrong with that? We have formed states according to language, so why not months according to language?

Rep1: What do you think about the country's food situation?

Batt: It's shameful!

Rep1: How do you think we can reform that?

Tugh: You need to change the capital frequently. People will die and the population will decrease.

Rep1: Che! Che! What is this, sir? You would say *that*?

Tugh: I am Mohammad bin Tughlaq!

Rep2: What have you heard about the fighting that is happening in Vietnam?

Tugh: Why worry about Vietnam when there's fighting between Mysore and Maharashtra?

Rep2: Okay. Please tell us a way to end the fighting between Mysore and Maharashtra.

Batt: Isn't the fight about one small region and whether it should join Mysore or Maharashtra?

Rep2: Yes.

Tugh: So if that region is given to Tamilnadu, the fighting will end.

Rep3: Then Mysore and Maharashtra will fight Tamilnadu.

Tugh: He asked for a way to end the fighting between Mysore and Maharashtra.

Rep3: But to do that you have incited another fight.

Rep4: It is being said that women should be given equal rights with men. What do you say?

Tugh: No home in which a woman has the authority has progressed. If this is the fate of the home, then what will be the fate of the nation?

Rep1: Sir, they are saying that in colleges, all lessons should be in Tamil only. What do you think about that?

Tugh: Very good. We will only learn what is good by making a lot of mistakes. Some things we do, thinking that they are good, end badly.

Rep2: What qualifications should be necessary to become president?

Tugh: The person should know how to sign his name.

Rep3: Are you going to jump into this country's government?

Tugh: Yes.

Batt: Tughlaq is going to run in the upcoming by-election.

Rep3: Which by-election?

Tugh: For the place that will be open if some Parliament member dies.

Rep3: What will be your platform in the election?

Tugh: I am going to make money, not for me, but for the country. I am going to reform the country.

Rep4: How?

Batt: You will know that only after he wins the election.

Rep4: What is the assurance that he is going to win? People don't know anything about him. How will they vote?

Tugh: But isn't it the case that the people know very well those who are running against me in the election?

Rep4: They know the others well.

Tugh: Then how could they vote for them? They will realize that and vote for me.

Rep1: Mister, you may not know it, but after it gets out that you are going to run in the election, all the other parties will join together to form a single front. Congress, Swatantra, Communist, DMK, Socialist…all will join into one.

Tugh: Even then, I will win. I have seen with my own eyes how "unity" will be in a place where there is an alliance.

Rep2: Okay. There is a vacant seat in the Tamilnadu Assembly and an election will happen. Why don't you stand in the election for the seat in the Tamilnadu Assembly? Why are you going to the Parliament in Delhi?

Tugh: I have heard that Delhi is the perfect place for people like me.

Scene 5

Place: Public meeting

Characters: Leader, Govind, Sastri, Velayuttam, Tyagarajan, Tughlaq

Lead: You know that this All Party meeting has been assembled to support Ramesh, the All Party Alignment candidate for the Parliament by-election. Today is the last day before the election. First, I invite Mr. Govind to speak, expressing the gratitude of the All Party Alignment and to give him the opportunity to preside over this meeting.

Gov: This All Party Alignment was formed to contest against Mohammad bin Tughlaq. You know all about our party. We went to jail. We won Independence for you. If you vote for Tughlaq now it will be like you are laying the foundation for a Tughlaq government for our country. If you vote for our party, Tughlaq will lose. If you vote for Tughlaq, we will lose. After considering this, you must come to the right decision. Jai Hind!

Lead: Next I invite Mr. Sastri to speak.

Sas: Ladies and gentlemen. I don't know very much Tamil. But please don't vote for this Tughlaq. That is not good. I am telling you to please vote for this All Party Alignment. You don't know what is good for you. But I know. We need dharma—law and order—in this country. Study the *Gita*. Vote for Ramesh. Only then will I be satisfied.

Lead: Next Mr. Velayuttam will speak.

Vel: Look at Russia! What did Lenin say? What did Marx say? We need to destroy imperialism! Workers! A vote for Tughlaq is a vote against workers! So make Tughlaq lose the election!

Lead: Next I invite Mr. Tyagarajan to speak.

Tyag: Mr. Leader, Sir, Mothers, Men and Women, first, I would like to express my thanks to you for inviting me to speak on behalf of my party at this great meeting. Who is this Tughlaq? Where did he come from? He who was buried has been born again! He who has been reborn is trying to get new life. Think deeply about what will happen if he gets that new life. This is the man who minted currency on leather. Can we expect him to be trustworthy? He is the man who changed the capital. Should responsibility for us be placed in his hands? You must think deeply. This is all I ask of you. A vote cannot be requested. Even if money is given a vote cannot be bought. Even if threatened with violence you won't get our vote…Tell him that this is your song. Our land is the land where Kannaki was born. Our land is the land that preserves and praises the *Silappatikaram* and *Manimekalai.* Therefore your vote should be for the All Party Alliance.

(This meeting ends and after a few hours Tughlaq speaks on the same stage.)

Tugh: A little while ago at a public meeting here, many people spoke against me. I won't speak long. How many times have you voted in elections up to now? What have you gained from that? What has been the return? The only thing you've gotten in return is the mark they put on your hand to show that you've voted! What do you care who wins in this election? They're all the same. So what's wrong with me winning once? I know that Ramesh, who's running against me, is a good guy. But should good people go to Parliament? You think about it.

Scene 9

Place: Prime Minister's Room
Characters: Ibn Battuta, Tyagarajan, Tughlaq, Sastri, Govind, Velayuttam

Batt: Did you see how everyone was agitating about the language problem? How easily Tughlaq has solved everything.

Tyag: He promised he would change the law about national language. So the agitations have ceased.

Batt: Your people need a promise. Is that all?

Tyag: You need to fulfill that promise.

Tugh: Which promises have been fulfilled up till now? We start to make promises in elections, we come to power, we measure and calculate, distribute promises, then leave. The people are satisfied. A successful democratic government is one which goes on making promise after promise.

Sas: But those promises must be kept.

Tugh: Yes. It shall be kept. A political promise shall always be kept as a promise and it shall always remain a promise.

Tyag: If you give a promise, you need to keep it. If you don't, this confusion will happen all over again in the South.

Tugh: Then I'll promise again.

Batt: The issue of the language problem has been solved. Your opinions on that are no longer necessary.

Gov: I agree with that. We've passed the law on national language. So what next?

Sas: If I could just say…

Batt: I have to keep reminding you constantly that you are one of 450 Deputy Prime Ministers belonging to your party.

Sas: What is this? The language problem is solved, Sir! We all agree with that.

Batt: Next on Tughlaq's plan is to wipe out corruption and bribery.

Gov: What is that, Sir?

Batt: Government officials collect bribe money to do things for ordinary people. That is against the law. This is bribery and corruption, isn't it?

Gov: Yes.

Batt: Tughlaq's plan is to wipe out all of this illegal activity.

Gov: How, Sir?

Tugh: I will wipe out illegal bribes by making bribes legal.

Gov: What?

Tugh: Yes. We need to fix the bribe amounts like we fix how much the salary should be for government officials and employees.

Sas: Ayyayyo! Have you suggested we award bribe money to government officials?

Tugh: We are awarding their salary money. Is that only fair?

Sas: But aren't they getting their salary money lawfully?

Tugh: That's why I'm saying to make taking bribe money legal. Still, if the common people need something to happen it can be 20,000 for the Secretary, 10,000 for the Undersecretary, 5,000 for the Superintendent, 1,000 for the Head Clerk, 100 for Clerks, and 10 rupees for the peon. They can give money for this, or they can give jewels to the wives of this or that official.

Gov: What is this atrocity, Sir?

Batt: What's atrocious about it? It happens illegally, so why not have it happen legally?

Sas: All this is against the law, so how can it be in accordance with the law?

Tugh: What's wrong with it? Am I doing something that's never been done before? This strategy has been demonstrated by my predecessors before now. It used to be against the law to renounce the husband holding your hand; now divorce is legal. Black

market business used to be illegal; now they have made ration shops legal. It used to be illegal to tell lies to deceive people; now elections are legal. What was illegal yesterday is legal today. What is illegal today shall be legal tomorrow. The previous government made law an ass. My government shall make it a pig.

Gov: Sir, are you going to make bribes legal?

Tugh: There is no use in continuing to object to that. You need to go make it into law in Parliament using your votes.

Gov: Just one small amendment to that.

Batt: It can't be changed.

Gov: Oh no, it's not that. But could you please add some rate for Members of Parliament?

Tugh: Oh!

Batt: We should do that Sultan.

Tugh: Okay.

Gov: In the same way, for Deputy Prime Ministers, some *special.*…

Batt: Will Ministers take money from the people? I can't think about it.

Tugh: Yes. Ministers shouldn't take money from the people. We need to make some new arrangement. According to the legal rate officials take, they need to give a 25% share to the Minister. That is the best way.

Tyag: I don't think the people will accept that bribe rate law or the legal share for Ministers.

Tugh: The people of our country will accept anything.

Tyag: There will be public meetings in our country against this.

Tugh: There is no lack of those here. I have understood our country's people well. They will protest anything at first. But at the end of the day those objections will go. They will go without comment, thinking, "[w]hatever the government has done is okay, this is our fate."

Tyag: The next elections will come; you need to keep that in mind.

Tugh: The man who thinks about the next elections is a mere politician; the man who thinks about the next generation is a leader. I don't think about either—I'm a democrat.

Gov: Like Sir says, even though our people will object at first, they'll forget that later. We don't need to worry. Let's put this into law.

Sas: Next we need to deal with the food problem.

Batt: No need. Everyone who has tried that has had a miserable fate.

Sas: But if we don't deal with it immediately our country will have a miserable fate.

Batt: If we don't deal with the food problem that will be the country's fate. But even if we do, the fate will be the same.

Tugh: Even if we don't deal with them, some issues will solve themselves. The food problem is like that.

Sas: It would be good if we could somehow lower the unemployment rate.

Batt: How could we lower the unemployment rate?

Gov: We need to give everyone some job.

Tugh: I have already given positions to as many Ministers as I could.

Batt: I have an idea. We can say frequently at public meetings that we need to reduce the unemployment rate. That's enough to satisfy our people.

Sas: Okay. That solves that problem. So far we've solved the language problem, bribery and corruption, food, and unemployment.

Tugh: You don't need to worry about any other problems. I will solve those.

Tyag: There are so many unsolved problems.

Tugh: Those are left for each government to inherit from the previous one. We will do that. We should not act against our tradition and national practice.

Tyag: In many places in the South there will be protests. What are you going to give to the South Indian people?

Tugh: Consolation.

Tyag: One other problem. There is an agitation that you need to give Tirupati to Tamilnadu. One man has gone on a hunger strike. Another has announced that he is going to immolate himself. What are you going to do about this?

Tugh: All right. I'll give Tirupati to Tamilnadu.

Vel: If you give Tirupati to Tamilnadu, won't there be agitations in Andhra?

Tugh: I will give Tanjavore to Andhra.

Gov: It seems like the food situation is still bad in a few states.

Tugh: That's why I have decided to go to America.

Sas: You're going to America? Why?

Tugh: Shouldn't I see America? I am going to meet the American President and talk about world problems. I am going to discuss with the President of America about the problem facing the world.

Tyag: Why should we worry about other countries' problems?

Tugh: It's not necessary to worry about other countries' problems, but there's no point in worrying about *our* country's problems. So what should I worry about?

Sas: All of us Deputy Prime Ministers will also go abroad.

Batt: There aren't enough foreign countries for our Deputy Prime Ministers to visit.

Tugh: Let our Deputy Prime Ministers visit the municipalities.

Gov: The situation is that we need to listen to everything you say.

Batt: We don't say you need to listen. We just say to listen if you want to.

Sas: What is this, Sir? You have made us Deputy Prime Ministers. So what is the meaning of this "listen if you want to"? How can we not listen?

Batt: Okay, today in Parliament the bill on bribery and corruption he made needs to be passed into law. We need to talk about unemployment like we discussed. We need to keep making promises if and when the language problem comes up again.

Tyag: But we can't say how people will react.

Batt: Yes we can. They will think, "If this government goes, what will the next government do for us?" Do you think that the people support us thinking that we are

doing something for the country's well-being? "No matter what government comes we will have the same fate." Having thought this, these people won't say anything, just "Let them be in the position…." Only if the people *think* will a good government be formed. Until people realize that, there is no reason for people like us to worry.

Sas: Shall I speak now?

Tugh: Let us adjourn the meeting.

Batt: Tughlaq's durbar is over.

Tugh: What are you saying? Yes. This is definitely Tughlaq's royal court. What will you do? This is definitely Tughlaq's durbar. Everything will happen according to what *I* want. There is no room for anyone who opposes that. I don't need anyone to lift up their heads. I only need people to raise their hands. Parliament is a place where people lift their hands up and put their heads down.

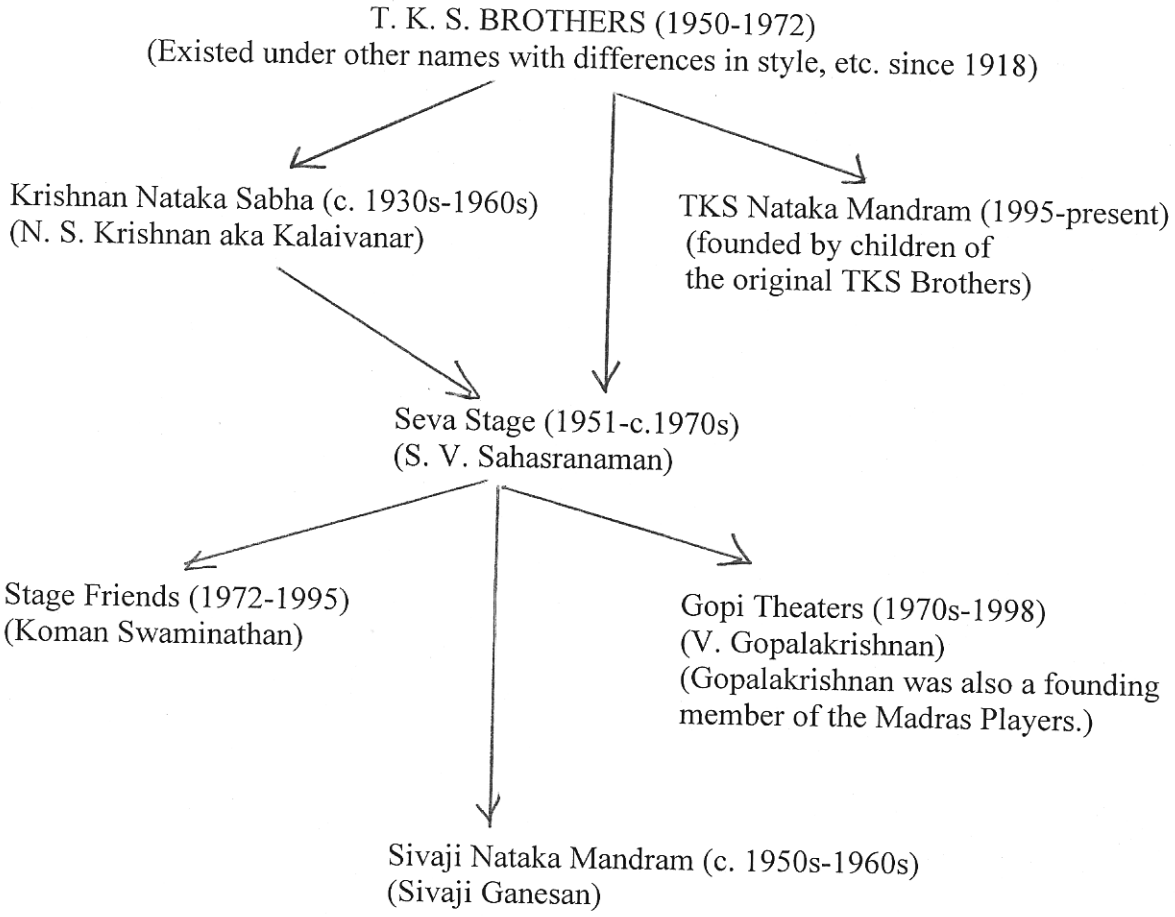
APPENDIX F

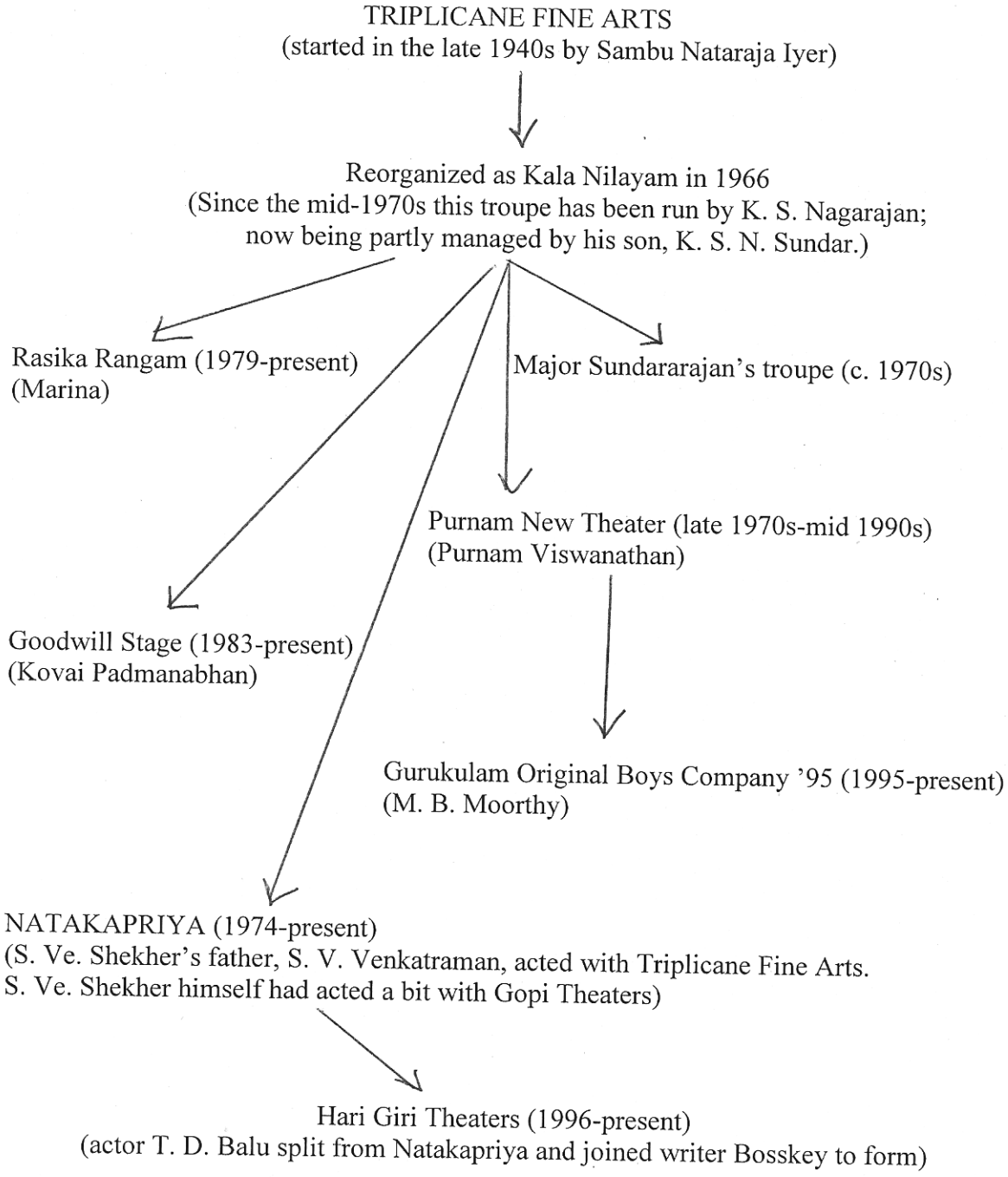
CHENNAI DRAMA TROUPES AND SOME RELATIONS

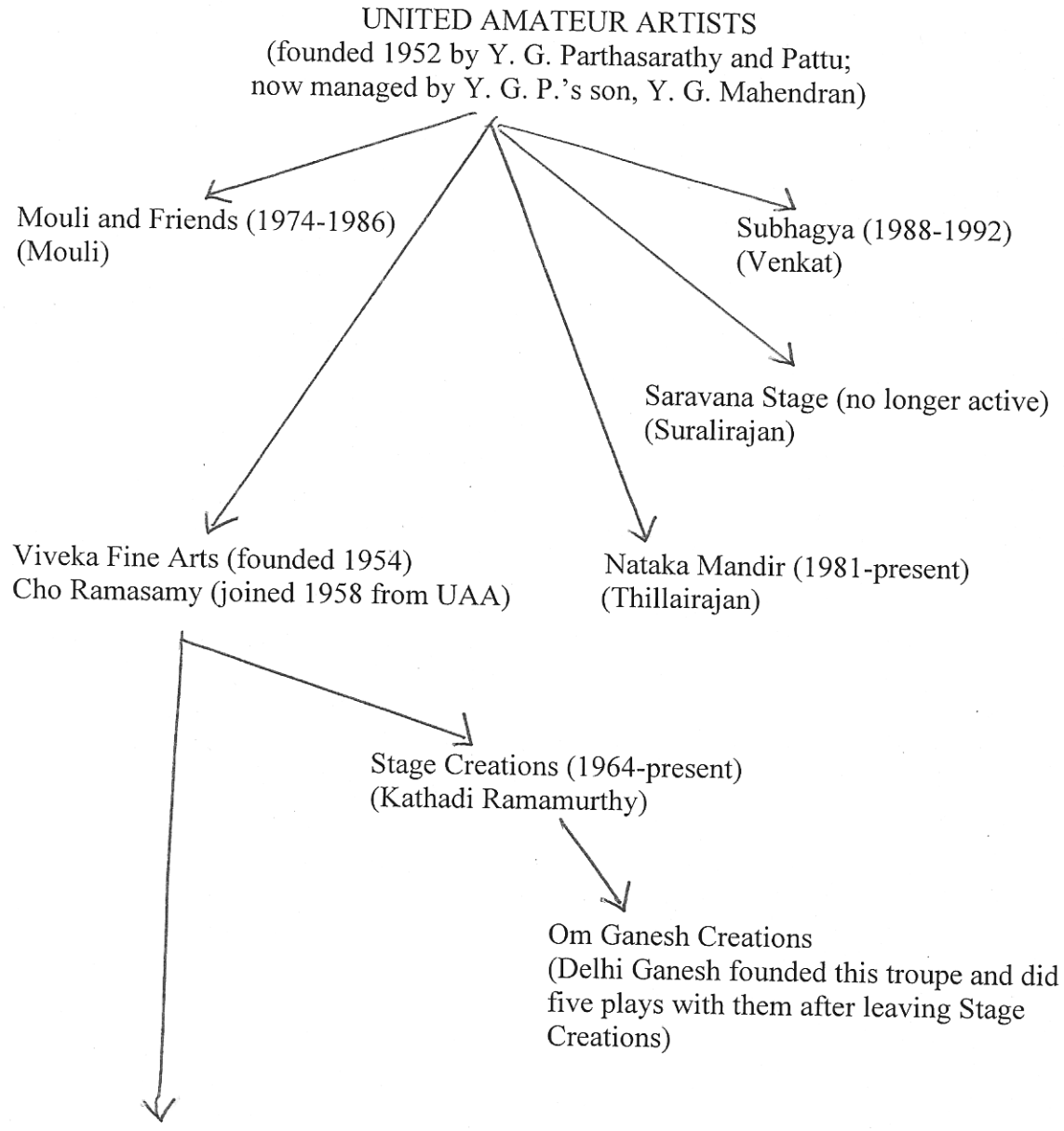
What follows is a family tree of sorts. Most sabha drama troupes formed when an actor or writer within an existing troupe decided to branch out on his own. Because troupes tend to center around a single personality, it is difficult for actors or writers to reach their full potential from someone else's troupe. However, they learn many skills as well as lessons in dramaturgy and production from the leader of the troupe they started with, and this family tree makes is an attempt to make those relationships between troupes, which manifest themselves in the plays and the stylistic choices, easier to spot.

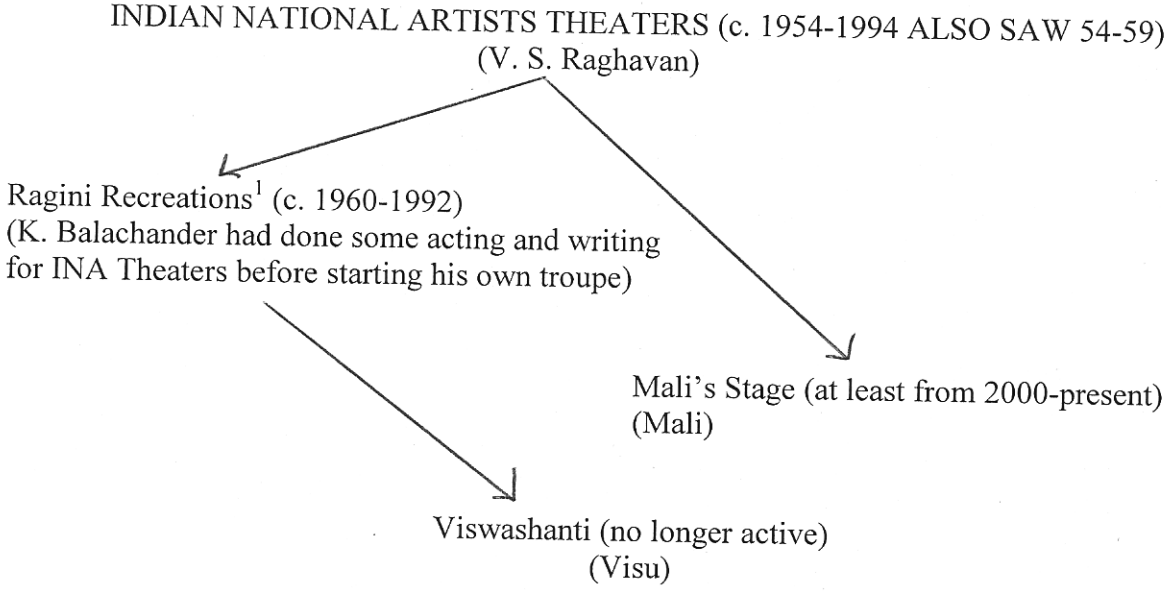
The tree is not, however, absolute. Many writers, Venkat, for example, will write for several troupes (in his case United Amateur Artists and S. Ve. Shekher primarily) before starting their own troupes. In Venkat's case, running his own troupe proved to be too much and he went back to writing for other troupes and increasing his involvement in the television medium.

The dates are pulled from a variety of different sources and brought together in these charts, which I hope prove helpful. Some I got directly from troupe leaders or other actors, some from performance souvenirs or newspaper reviews, and some are from books such as *Tamiḻ Nāṭakamēṭai Muṉṉōṭikaḷ* ("Pioneers of Tamil Stage Drama"), edited by S. S. Ramar Ilango and *Tamiḻ Nāṭakam—Nēṟṟum Iṉṟum* ("Tamil Drama—Yesterday Today"), edited by K. Bhagavathy. Oftentimes the printed biodata of the actors will include dates that they were with certain troupes that allow for estimations. When I was unable to ascertain exact dates of a troupe's founding or demise, I have given an idea (for example, "Krishnan Nataka Sabha (c. 1930s-1960s)."

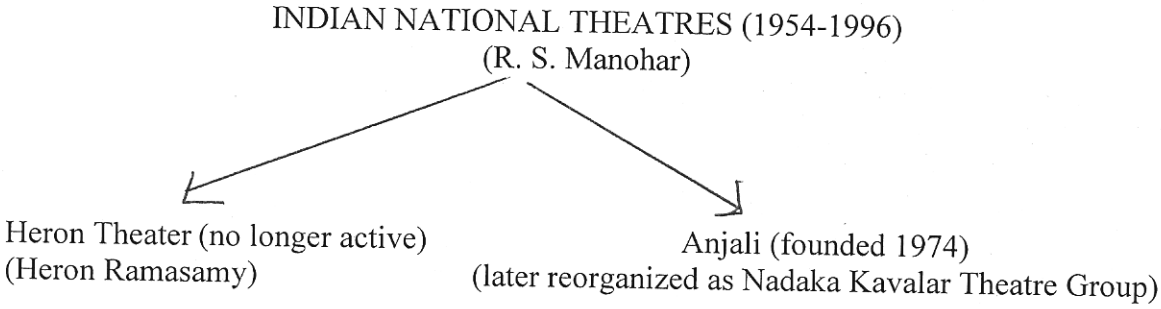

T. K. S. BROTHERS (1950-1972)
(Existed under other names with differences in style, etc. since 1918)
Krishnan Nataka Sabha (c. 1930s-1960s)
(N. S. Krishnan aka Kalaivanar)
TKS Nataka Mandram (1995-present)
(founded by children of
the original TKS Brothers)
Seva Stage (1951-c.1970s)
(S. V. Sahasranaman)
Stage Friends (1972-1995)
(Koman Swaminathan)
Gopi Theaters (1970s-1998)
(V. Gopalakrishnan)
(Gopalakrishnan was also a founding
member of the Madras Players.)
Sivaji Nataka Mandram (c. 1950s-1960s)
(Sivaji Ganesan)

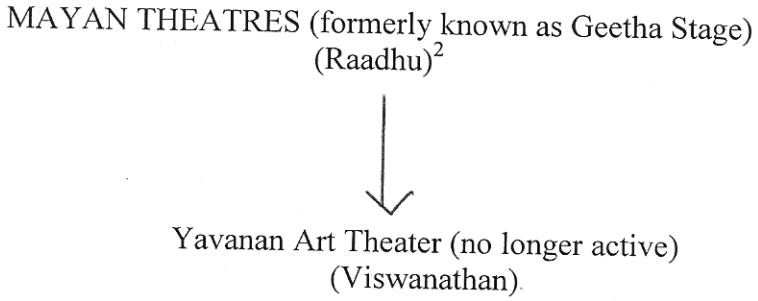

TRIPLICANE FINE ARTS
(started in the late 1940s by Sambu Nataraja Iyer)
Reorganized as Kala Nilayam in 1966
(Since the mid-1970s this troupe has been run by K. S. Nagarajan;
now being partly managed by his son, K. S. N. Sundar.)
Rasika Rangam (1979-present)
(Marina)
Major Sundararajan's troupe (c. 1970s)
Purnam New Theater (late 1970s-mid 1990s)
(Purnam Viswanathan)
Goodwill Stage (1983-present)
(Kovai Padmanabhan)
Gurukulam Original Boys Company '95 (1995-present)
(M. B. Moorthy)
NATAKAPRIYA (1974-present)
(S. Ve. Shekher's father, S. V. Venkatraman, acted with Triplicane Fine Arts.
S. Ve. Shekher himself had acted a bit with Gopi Theaters)
Hari Giri Theaters (1996-present)
(actor T. D. Balu split from Natakapriya and joined writer Bosskey to form)


UNITED AMATEUR ARTISTS
(founded 1952 by Y. G. Parthasarathy and Pattu;
now managed by Y. G. P.'s son, Y. G. Mahendran)
Mouli and Friends (1974-1986)
(Mouli)
Subhagya (1988-1992)
(Venkat)
Saravana Stage (no longer active)
(Suralirajan)
Viveka Fine Arts (founded 1954)
Cho Ramasamy (joined 1958 from UAA)
Nataka Mandir (1981-present)
(Thillairajan)
Stage Creations (1964-present)
(Kathadi Ramamurthy)
Om Ganesh Creations
(Delhi Ganesh founded this troupe and did five plays with them after leaving Stage Creations)
Kalki Fine Arts (1958 until reorganized as Nav Bharath Theatres—still active)
(Koothapiran had also worked with Kala Nilayam)



[1] Sometimes noted as "Ragini Creations."





[2] Raadhu used to have a troupe called Geetha Stage.

OTHER NOTABLE TROUPES

1. Egmore Dramatic Society (no longer active)
2. Shantiniketan (Seshadri) (no longer active)
3. Mother Creations (C. V. Chandramohan)
4. Sathya Sai Creations (Karaikudi Narayanan)
5. Kalamandir (Bombay Chanakya)
6. Augusto Creations (Augusto)
7. Mahalakshmi Ladies Drama Troupe (founded 1989 in Bombay, moved to Chennai permanently in 1996) (Bombay Gnanam)
8. Prayatna (K. Vivek Shankar)
9. Rail Priya (1994-present)
10. United Visuals (1994-present) (T. V. Varadarajan)

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Kristen has published two articles and several book reviews to date. Her articles are "*Pygmalion*: Changes of Class and Culture" published in *Sagar*. (Vol. 16, 2006): 23-34 and "Bharata Natyam and Terukkuttu: E. Krishna Iyer's Revival Efforts" in *Sagar* (Vol. 10, 2003): 1-16. She has published the following book reviews: Ranjini Mazumdar. *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City* in *The Journal of American Culture* (forthcoming); Sharon Maas. *The Speech of Angels* in *Ethnic and Third World Literature Journal* (Vol. 5, Spring 2005): 59-60; and Arvind Singhal and Everett M. Rogers. *India's Communication Revolution: From Bullock Carts to Cyber Marts* in *Sagar* (Vol. 9, 2002): 122-124. She also assisted on Sankaran Radhakrishnan's "Tamil Pronunciation" audio guide which can be found at http://lamc.utexas.edu/itsaud/tm_0_02.html. In addition she has presented papers at a number of conferences, given guest lectures, and participated in South Asia outreach projects.

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